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164-PAGE SPECIAL

Issue No. **445**

Yearbook 2018

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OUR VERDICT ★★★★★

Chord Shawline Power Chord
Hi-Fi Choice Jul 2018

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AWARDS 2018**

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**WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018**

Accessories
Best analogue interconnect over £50
Chord Company Clearway

**WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2017**

Accessories
Best speaker cable
Chord Company Clearway



110

WIN! Rega's Planar 8



146

Beautiful System ATC

BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



EDITOR'S CHOICE:
Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance



RECOMMENDED:
Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance



GROUP TEST WINNER:
Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!



2018 was another amazing year for all things audio. With everything from amplifiers to turntables evolving to embrace the way we want to consume music today, this bumper 164-page special issue celebrates the hi-fi high-points from the past 12 months. Flicking through the

review and system pages demonstrates the strength of today's audio industry and the diverse range of products available to cater for all kinds of music listener – from those just starting out to seasoned audiophiles – and feeding our passion for sound in increasingly innovative ways. Each of the products selected for this ultimate product guide is a coveted *Hi-Fi Choice* badge winner applauded by our team of expert reviewers for a winning combination of outstanding sound quality and value for money – prices shown are from the time of original publication.

And don't forget our competition for one lucky reader to win an outstanding Rega Planar 8 turntable package – worth £2,440 – fitted with the company's Apheta 2 moving-coil cartridge. Turn to p110 to enter now!

Lee Dunkley Editor

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Hi-FiChoice Contents

hifichoice.co.uk Issue No. **445** Yearbook 2018

BEST ON TEST 2018



20
Bowers & Wilkins 703 S2



94
Auralic Aries G1



56
Eclipse TD510ZMK2/TD520SW



11
Pro-Ject Debut III S Audiophile

TURNTABLES

- 9 ELAC** Miracord 70
- 11 Pro-Ject** Debut III S Audiophile
- 13 Pro-Ject** Primary E
- 15 Rega** Planar 1 Plus
- 16 Rega** Planar 8

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

- 19 Acoustic Energy** AE309
- 20 Bowers & Wilkins** 703 S2
- 22 Falcon Acoustics** RAM Studio 30
- 24 Focal** Kanta N°2
- 26 Neat Acoustics** Iota Xplorer
- 29 Q Acoustics** 3050i
- 31 Scansonic** M-6
- 32 Spendor** A7

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

- 35 Acoustic Energy** AE300
- 37 Amphion** Argon1
- 39 Bowers & Wilkins** 606
- 41 Bowers & Wilkins** 707 S2
- 43 DALI** Spektor 2
- 43 Fyne Audio** F301
- 45 Dynaudio** Special Forty
- 47 Mission** QX-2
- 47 Q Acoustics** 3020i
- 48 Raidho** XT-1
- 51 Sonus faber** Sonetto II

ACTIVE SPEAKER SYSTEM

- 54 KEF** LS50 Wireless

2.1 SPEAKER SYSTEM

- 56 Eclipse** TD510ZMK2/TD520SW

COMPACT SPEAKERS

- 58 DALI** Katch
- 58 Sonos** One

DACS

- 62 Chord Electronics** Qutest
- 65 iFi Audio** nano iOne
- 65 Mytek** Liberty

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

- 69 Audia Flight** FL Three S
- 71 Audio Analogue** AAcento
- 73 Cyrus** ONE HD
- 75 Pioneer** A-40AE
- 76 NAD** D 3020 V2
- 76 PMC** Cor
- 79 Primare** I15 Prisma

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER

- 80 Mitchell & Johnson** S800/S815

POWER AMPLIFIER

- 83 Leema Acoustics** Hydra II Anniversary Edition

CD PLAYER/INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

- 84 YBA** Heritage CD100/A100

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS

- 86 Naim** Uniti Star
- 88 Quad** Artera Solus



WIN!
Rega Planar 8
turntable
pack worth
£2,440
p110



102
Bowers & Wilkins PX



108
Creek OBH-8mk2

CONTENTS YEARBOOK 2018

"As she sang *A Natural Woman* in 2015, a tear was seen to roll down Obama's cheek"

Music Legends: Aretha Franklin p134

STREAMING

- 90 Novafidelity** X45
- 93 Auralic** Aries Mini
- 93 Naim** Uniti Core
- 94 Auralic** Aries G1
- 97 Auralic** Aries G2
- 99 Cambridge Audio** CXN V2
- 101 Pioneer** N-70AE

HEADPHONES

- 102 Audio-Technica** ATH-ADX5000
- 102 Bowers & Wilkins** PX
- 103 MrSpeakers** Voce
- 103 Sennheiser** HD 820
- 105 Sennheiser** IE 800 S
- 105 1More** Triple Driver BT

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS

- 107 Exposure** XM HP
- 107 iFi Audio** xDSD

PHONO STAGES

- 108 Creek** OBH-8mk2
- 108 Dynavector** P75 Mk4
- 109 Lindemann** Limetree Phono
- 109 YBA** Genesis PH1

MUSIC REVIEWS

- 113** The best releases from the last year to put your hi-fi system through its paces

MUSIC LEGENDS

- 122** Van Morrison
- 128** Ry Cooder
- 134** Aretha Franklin

OPINIONS

- 127** The HFC team say it as they see it on the hottest hi-fi topics



69
Audio Flight FL Three S

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEMS

- 140** Incredible setups that sound every bit as good as they look. Including systems from: Luxman, Quad, ATC, NAD and Dynaudio

BACK ISSUES

- 157** Missed a past copy of HFC? Complete your collection here

NEXT ISSUE

- 162** The sonic treats to look out for in next month's review-packed HFC



152
Beautiful System NAD/Dynaudio



84
YBA Heritage CD100/A100

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DYNAUDIO Evoke



Hi-Fi
Choice

RECOMMENDED

ELAC

Miracord 70

Celebrating 70 years since the first ELAC turntable – the PW1 autochanger – rolled off the production line, the Miracord 70 comes as a complete package including arm and Audio-Technica AT-95E (HFC 387), which remains one of hi-fi's great bargains. This is pre-fitted into the tonearm, meaning setup is merely a matter of fitting belt and platter, balancing the arm, setting anti-skate, and you're good to go.

The ELAC is built around a solid MDF base with a high-gloss black finish and metallic trim. The sub-platter rotates on a ceramic ball and has a hardened steel bearing shaft, spinning between two sintered bronze radial bearings. Four rubber bumpers support the main platter when in place.

This weighs in at 2.6kg and is a solid piece of glass, coated on its underside with a black ceramic paint and topped with a felt mat. The sub-platter is belt driven by a high-quality synchronous AC motor, which is topped with a twin-stepped pulley to provide 33 and 45rpm.

Sound quality

Careful placement is a point worth taking time over, as the deck does not have adjustable feet. When properly positioned, though, it gives a remarkably good account of itself. The bass performance is an utterly fascinating experience. Jazzanova's *Takes You Back* has some low bass notes capable of shifting furniture

on the right system and the Miracord 70 powers them out without even breaking a sweat. It turns out it has a very clean, detailed and extended low end, but it is also tight, focused and has absolutely no overhang, wallow or bloat. As a result, it can appear to sound a little 'thin' at times, but when a proper bass note comes along, it becomes clear that it is actually missing nothing and not adding anything either. In fact, for a £1,000 deck, it is an incredibly accomplished all-round performance.

Fortunately, the rest of the frequency range is more than up to matching the high standards set by the ELAC's low-end performance. Across the midband, the Miracord 70 is fluid and detailed but does err on the slightly brighter end of the tonal palette. In its supplied configuration it can lack a little warmth and even very occasionally stray into upper midband hardness, but experimentation reveals that this is a characteristic of the tonearm and cartridge combination. The AT-95E cartridge does rather belie its budget origins a little here, and even though it is good in most areas, a change to the smoother-sounding Goldring 2500 works wonders in this respect and never comes at the expense of atmosphere or detail. Michael Hedges' guitar work on *Aerial Boundaries* is expansive and located beautifully centre stage, with each pluck as perfectly outlined as I could hope for.

All things considered, the Audio-Technica is a good partner for the

Miracord 70. At the top end, this cartridge can occasionally become a little hard and splashy but the ELAC deck makes its treble sound surprisingly couth and almost sophisticated. Cymbal strikes, meanwhile, are sharp and crisp but blessed with a purity that makes them sound truly lifelike.

The other thing that is very obvious is the fine sense of precision within the soundstage that is usually the preserve of rather more costly designs than this one. The Miracord 70 sets up a very solid and well-defined image within the loudspeakers and extends nicely behind the speaker plane as well. As a result, performers are given plenty of space, which allows them to be easily located within the musical action.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this is a well-engineered and beautifully made turntable that offers a fine performance. The inclusion of a good-quality cartridge is a big plus and yet the Miracord 70 is more than capable of revealing the benefits of transducer upgrades, if desired further down the line. As plug-and-play combinations go, this is certainly among the best. **AS**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ELAC Miracord 70

PRICE
£999

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
11kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
465 x 140 x 365mm

FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• 9in aluminium/
steel tonearm
• Audio-Technica
AT-95E moving-
magnet cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
Hi-Fi Network Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 643088

WEBSITE
hifi-network.com

REVIEWED
HFC 436

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Sophisticated bass; build quality; overall package at the price

DISLIKE: Manual speed change; lack of Perspex lid

WE SAY: A super sounding, ready-to-play turntable package



Carbon Dome™ Tweeter
for amazing accuracy

Solid Body Tweeter
for life-like imaging

Continuum™ cone for
exceptional transparency

Decoupled FST™ chassis
for the cleanest midrange

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Bowers & Wilkins

www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk/700series



**Hi-Fi
Choice**

RECOMMENDED

Pro-Ject Debut III S Audiophile

Distinguished from the rest of Pro-Ject's huge range of turntables by the new S-shaped tonearm, the Debut III S Audiophile is based around a superbly finished gloss plinth, which is available in black or white. The sub-platter has a stainless steel bearing shaft, which spins in a brass housing and is driven by a flat belt from the motor. The aforementioned aluminium tonearm is 8.6in long and easy to set up and fine tune. Available adjustments even include azimuth, as the arm tube can be rotated about its axis in the bearing housing after loosening a screw. It comes pre-fitted with a moving-magnet cartridge that is based on an Ortofon OM10 and dubbed the Pick-IT 25 A. However, internally, the coils have been replaced by pure silver types, which Pro-Ject claims: "Opens up the transparency of the cartridge" and offers better quality and dynamics. The deck's output is via stereo phono sockets at the rear and a £45 Connect-IT E cable is bundled.

The final new feature is to be found underneath in the form of three feet constructed from Aluminium and TPE (Thermoplastic Elastomer) to offer better levels of insulation against vibration. Exotic feet like this are usually found on more expensive decks, whereas I tend to be of the

opinion that they make more sense on budget designs that are less likely to find themselves sat on a proper audiophile support.

Sound quality

Bass performance is impressively weighty, which immediately puts the Pro-Ject a step ahead of its peers. There is a caveat here, as bass notes occasionally outstay their welcome a little. Happily, switching the supplied felt mat for a Pro-Ject Leather-IT (£50) sees a much tighter and better controlled response.

Across the midband it does a fine job of capturing instruments and singers vividly. Budget designs often tend to blur the finer aspects of the soundstage, but this separates individuals out well. It images very competently and has good depth perspective, giving a fair sense of atmosphere to recordings.

Ultimately its lateral perspective is rather curtailed and central image stability could be stronger, but it's important to remember its three-figure price tag. All things considered, it turns in a very fine performance bearing in mind its price.

At the top end, however, it is clear that the newly developed cartridge is working its magic. I'm very fond of the old Ortofon OM series, but am well aware that it is a little soft around the edges. This isn't the case

with the Pick-IT 25 A. Those silver coils imbue just the right amount of sparkle upon proceedings, but without ever straying into harsh territory. As a result, violin strings are vivid but without screech and the cymbals backing *Outlaw Man* by the Eagles shimmer delicately off into the distance. Out of curiosity, I dig out an Ortofon OM10 for comparison. While the rich, smooth tones of the OM10 are like an old friend, the sound becomes a little soporific and loses its sense of keen musicality. As a result, I'd definitely stick with the cartridge as supplied, which balances the combination of deck and cartridge superbly.

Conclusion

Even though the Pro-Ject Debut range might already be a little daunting, the Debut III S Audiophile is a welcome addition to the family. It takes the best of the existing models and adds a dash of extra sophistication and poise to their performance. The individual changes add up to a convincing package, and it is clear that this is a design that has been properly thought out. The whole is most definitely greater than the sum of the parts, but be sure to budget for a better mat. **AS**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Debut III S Audiophile

PRICE
£325

ORIGIN
Austria

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
415 x 118 x 320mm

FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• 8.6in S-shaped aluminium tonearm
• Pro-Ject Pick-IT 25 A moving-magnet cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 437

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Stylish S-shaped tonearm; cartridge; effective isolation

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Supplied felt mat limits performance

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A highly capable hi-fi turntable package at a great price point

FEATURES



OVERALL





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Pro-Ject Primary E

Complete with everything you need to get spinning vinyl, apart from a built-in phono stage, the main difference between the Primary E and the outgoing Primary base deck centres around the motor that's mounted to the MDF plinth. The E model dispenses with the wall-wart and block arrangement of the older design and substitutes a motor that works on a standard 230V AC mains feed and uses a fixed cable and plug, which reduces the cost and makes for a far tidier installation.

The tonearm is 8.6in long, made from aluminium and employs sapphire bearings for smooth travel. Where it differs from many other examples is that Pro-Ject has optimised it to work with the Ortofon OM series moving-magnet cartridge. This means that there's no anti-skate adjustment and that the tonearm ships with the counterweight already in place, set accurately for the correct tracking weight at the factory and making it straightforward to set up.

Extract the deck from its packaging, plug the interconnects into a phono preamp or integrated amplifier with a built-in MM stage and fit the belt, and you are good to go in just a few minutes. Fitting the rubber belt to the MDF platter is the only part of this process that is remotely involved, as it runs around the outer edge of the platter and can be a little fiddly to get it to sit perfectly in place. It's also easy to snag when lifting the acrylic lid too, which means some occasional

annoyance at having to fit it again, but practice makes perfect.

Sound quality

The Primary E performs better than you might reasonably expect for the price. There is no audible sign of pitch instability and background noise levels are commendably low, which ensures there is a reasonable and pleasing sense of dynamics to music. Christine And The Queens *iT* comes across with all the spaciousness and scale of the recording intact. Vocals are well separated from the deep electronic bass and there's a commendable level of fine detail. The bass extension might not be as deep as with the same material played on more upmarket rivals, but there is sufficient weight and it integrates well with mid-bass frequencies in what feels like an even response. No less importantly, the Pro-Ject defines low notes with a crispness and agility that ensures it never sounds sluggish or overly warm. Coupled with the decent pitch stability, the result is a sense of rhythmic assurance that means even high-tempo material retains a feeling of order and cohesion.

The effortlessly funky nature of Little Feat's *Rock & Roll Doctor* is conveyed with a vigour that draws you into the music in such a way that you can forgive any lack of tonal richness or top-end refinement.

Where the Ortofon gives the Primary E an advantage is that it is able to keep poorer pressings listenable in a way that rivals often

struggle to manage. The rather congested and slightly dull pressing of Chvrches' *Love Is Dead* delivers the musical content without concerning itself too much with the limitations of the record. This means top-quality pressings won't always show the high levels of performance they are really capable of, but the balance is well judged. It also does a decent job of handling well-worn LPs and it takes some fairly significant surface damage to provoke the tonearm into tracking errors. If you seek a turntable to play finds from record fairs and other less than pristine LPs, this is a solid bet.

Conclusion

The Primary E can be relied upon to play records long term without wearing them out – something of an issue with some similarly priced but non-hi-fi rival vinyl spinning designs – and has engineered out some of the flexibility of the older models in the pursuit of hitting a new low entry-level price point. But what is most surprising about the Primary E, is its ability to deliver a genuinely satisfying musical performance at such a very attractive price, making it an ideal turntable for any new or retuning fans to the format. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Primary E
PRICE
£149
ORIGIN
Austria
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
4kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
420 x 112 x 330mm
FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• 8.6in aluminium tonearm
• Ortofon OM cartridge
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 442

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Energetic and rhythmically assured performance; build; ease of use

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: An impressive starter deck that delivers decent performance at an attractive asking price

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by

roon

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Beside from being a powerful, fanless music server, what sets Nucleus apart is that it's powered by Roon OS – a fast and lightweight operating system optimized to do just one thing: browse and play music. Roon is a multi-room, multi-user networked audio platform built to the exacting standards of audiophiles, so it offers features like bit-perfect playback, DSD and PCM oversampling, multichannel playback, and signal path display.



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APRIL 2018



JULY 2018



**Hi-Fi
Choice**

RECOMMENDED

Rega Planar 1 Plus

With a range of dedicated phono stage designs for every budget, Rega has traditionally held off from all-in-one vinyl solutions, but that all changed with the introduction of the Planar 1 Plus. As the name suggests, at its core this is a Planar 1 turntable and a belt-driven unsuspended design with the belt acting on a sub platter rather than directly against the phenolic resin platter.

The matching tonearm is the RB110, which has been tweaked to include automatic bias adjustment. Rega says this makes installation easier than on any previous iteration. The slight counter to this is that the value the bias operates to is fixed and so may not suit all cartridges. It is, of course, an ideal match for the Carbon that comes supplied and if you roll the counterweight at the back of the tonearm to the raised rubber line, you'll have set the correct tracking weight too. What could be simpler?

The phono stage that has been incorporated into the Planar 1 Plus is derived from the standalone Fono Mini A2D moving-magnet option (HFC 360) that is still very much part of the range. Rega has removed the analogue-to-digital section along with the USB port, but beefed up the performance of the moving-magnet circuit, which outputs to a pair of RCA connections.

When it comes to setting up, the Plus is about as straightforward as it gets. Remove the cardboard liner under the sub platter, slide the

counterweight on, connect power and signal cables and pop the Perspex lid on. Even a novice should be up and running in less than five minutes.

Sound quality

From the off, Amadou and Mariam's fabulously involving *Mokou Mokou* has a real sense of the intimacy of the studio it was recorded in, while Mariam's vocal turn is recreated with a meaningful amount of weight and texture to it. Some of the effortless three dimensionality that more expensive members of the Rega range can demonstrate is present here and helps to immerse you in the music. There is a sense when the track gets more congested that the Carbon cartridge can struggle to make sense of all of the information and it hardens up a little at high levels, but never to the point where things become unlistenable.

Goldfrapp's faster and more potent *Rocket* allows the Planar 1 Plus to show off its impressive rhythmic assurance. It does a brilliant job of engaging at an emotional level and pulling the listener into the music. This has always been a Rega strong point, but it is still noteworthy just how entertaining it is here. More than almost any other turntable I've tried at this price point, it compels me to keep trying new music and it does a superb job of taking me beyond the equipment I'm listening to. This is not solely the preserve of more ballistic pieces either. Even with the positively stately *Black Pudding* by Mark Lanegan

and Duke Garwood, there is a cohesiveness that can be found lacking on some more expensive rivals.

Rega seems to have set the Planar 1 Plus to be inherently forgiving, no matter the condition of vinyl it spins. In terms of the equipment it is likely to be used with, this makes sense and it does a better job than most of keeping the poorly pressed *Meds* by Placebo listenable, and it is able to handle well-worn records pretty well too. The counter to this is that given a genuinely superb pressing – like *Toward The Within* by Dead Can Dance – it isn't always able to do it full justice and show off just how good it should sound.

Conclusion

With the Planar 1 Plus, Rega has managed to create a turntable that is utterly untaxing to set up and use, that still delivers the qualities that we have come to expect from the company. If you're looking for an entry-level turntable to be the first step to greater things with a clear upgrade route, the relatively fixed specification might not appeal, but as a beautifully realised one-stop shop for high-quality analogue playback, it certainly takes some beating. **ES**

► DETAILS

PRODUCT

Rega Planar 1 Plus

PRICE

£329

ORIGIN

UK

TYPE

Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT

4.35kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

447 x 117 x 360mm

FEATURES

- 33 & 45rpm
- Built-in MM phono stage
- RB110 tonearm with automatic bias adjustment
- Rega Carbon moving-magnet cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR

Rega Research Ltd.

TELEPHONE

01702 333071

WEBSITE

rega.co.uk

REVIEWED

HFC 438

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Engaging presentation; easy to install; build quality

DISLIKE: Sounds fractionally congested with busy recordings; lacks upgrade potential

WE SAY: A well thought out starter that balances convenience with performance



Rega Planar 8

Utilising technology found in its flagship turntable design, the all-new Planar 8 offers outstanding vinyl playback at the price

For the last couple of years Rega has been replacing its RP series of turntables with Planar decks, so it didn't take an enormous amount of reduction to work out that this would continue up the range to include the RP8. What wasn't so obvious is that the Planar 8 would be so different to its predecessor and almost every other Rega deck that came before it. It takes concepts from the RP8 and Planar 6, but also borrows from the Naiad – the company's flagship design. The most important of these is the application of mass – employing it where it is needed and eliminating it where it isn't. In the case of where it isn't, the main area where this has been tackled is the plinth. At first glance, the Planar 8

is very similar to the RP8 once the outer plinth of the older model is removed. In reality, the shape is different again and so is the construction and form. The Planar 8 plinth is 30 percent lighter than the RP8 and concentrates this on the 'stressed beam' principle we've seen on previous Rega designs. This is partnered with a new bearing assembly that holds a one-piece spindle and sub-platter in a brass housing that's placed in the chassis itself. Significant parts of the Planar 8 are as light as they can possibly be. With this done, Rega then adds mass at the locations of its choosing. The platter is made of glass, but it is rather more complex than it might first appear. It is a three-piece laminate of two different types of

glass with the thickest section at the outer edge. This allows it to have the heavy, 'flywheel'-like properties that are advantageous in a platter, but for this weight to be concentrated at the outer edge and away from the bearing – which in turn reduces noise.

The motor and power supply are similarly an interesting mixture of design practice we have seen before combined with technology from the Naiad. The 24V Neo PSU is the same as the one used in the Planar 6 (*HFC* 427). It borrows DSP technology from the RP10 and each unit is paired to a specific motor for the best possible partnership. As well as a clean power feed, you also get selectable speeds and easy fine adjustment. The motor is mounted in the same manner that was developed for the Naiad, with the bottom firmly attached to the chassis and the sides clear to reduce vibration. It acts on the platter via a belt made out of a special rubber, which was originally developed for the Naiad.

The RB880 tonearm is an evolution of the earlier 808. The main difference being a new bearing assembly that reduces the amount of unwanted movement to zero. A slimmer counterweight has been fitted that allows for greater fine adjustment. This latter innovation might sound superfluous, but it is by far the easiest Rega arm I've used to get the correct

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega Planar 8

PRICE
From £1,699

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
4.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
420 x 125 x 315mm

FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• RB880 tonearm
with optional Ania or
Apheta 2 cartridge
• Neo PSU

DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01702 333071

WEBSITE
rega.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 443



weight setting. For £1,699, the Planar 8 is supplied without a cartridge, but you can have either an Ania (HFC 427) or Apheta 2 (HFC 425) fitted, taking the overall package price to £2,119 and £2,439 respectively. Some enterprising dealers have already listed a moving-magnet option too, but Rega feels that the Planar 8 works best with moving-coil cartridges.

All of the flagship Naiad DNA has resulted in a turntable that has fewer

of the standard Rega styling features than usual and seeing it in the flesh I'm entirely sold on the design. Like the Planar 6, Rega has done a fine job of making this very light turntable feel pretty substantial too. It might sound strange, but the Planar 8 manages to make the anachronistic business of vinyl playback feel more like a 21st-century pursuit.

Sound quality

The review sample is supplied with a factory-fitted Apheta 2 moving-coil cartridge, but to get a better handle on the behaviour of the Planar 8, I start by fitting a Nagaoka MP-200 moving-iron cartridge (HFC 434). Connected to a Cyrus Phono Signature (HFC 408) and Naim Uniti Star one-box system (HFC 433), the Planar 8 quite literally makes its presence felt. If this turntable doesn't put to bed the notion that great analogue bass is tied to mass, I'm not sure what will.

The minimalist presentation of Zola Jesus' *Versions* is underpinned by truly wonderful low end. It is tuneful, well integrated and delivered with plenty of force. A little less attention grabbing, the upper registers are equally as compelling and the Planar 8 gets all the basics right to make the vinyl sing. It is entirely pitch stable and silent at idle and this ensures that Nicole Hummel's strong vocals are convincing and the interplay with the partnering string quartet is laid out in a completely obvious way. With no noise to affect your perception, the Rega is able to deliver a wonderful feeling of scale to even the biggest pieces of music.

Fitting the Ania moving-coil and stepping on to the first official rung of Rega's cartridge ladder is an instantly worthwhile move. The Ania is slightly on the warm side of neutral and the partnership that this forms with the Planar 8 is extremely pleasant. Together they deliver a level of involvement to voices and instruments in particular that is beyond what the Nagaoka can achieve. The effect this has on *White Winter Hymnal* by Fleet Foxes is notable. Without losing any of the fundamental accuracy, there's a level of emotional engagement that is hard to replicate in the digital domain.

One aspect of the performance that is immediate and 'totally Rega' is the effortless timing that the Planar 8 exhibits. It's important to stress that this isn't only with higher tempo material. The shuffling time signature of Fink's *Cold Feet* provides a fine demonstration of this and the Planar

8 makes it enormous fun. It attacks the raucous *Dig Your Own Hole* by The Chemical Brothers in a way that has me wanting to down tools and enjoy myself. This is neatly balanced with an ability to work with less than stellar recordings in a way that flatters without sacrificing fine detail.

Installing the Apheta 2 cartridge amplifies many of the attributes of the Planar 8. This is a very fast and potent-sounding cartridge. Connected to a device as agile and responsive as this deck is to experience vinyl as a high-resolution format. The result is much more unforgiving than the Ania, though, and some of the sweetness that the more affordable combination offers is lost. In return, you get a combo that will play anything you throw at it and make sense of it all, regardless of the number of musicians involved and levels they are playing at. The truly

The Planar 8 delivers a feeling of scale to even the biggest pieces of music

epic *Star Furnace* by The Comet Is Coming is usually a stern test of any turntable, but the Planar 8 handles it without breaking sweat.

Conclusion

Rega's Planar 8 really advances the idea of what constitutes state-of-the-art vinyl playback at this price. Fitted with the Ania moving-coil cartridge it really hits the sweet spot of the format while the saving allows you to pick up the exceptionally talented Fono MC phono stage (HFC 427). Almost regardless of the cartridge you end up pairing it with, it has the remarkable ability to thrill and entertain and is an exceptionally well thought-out turntable design that really delivers. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Outstandingly fast, accurate and neutral sound; build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Won't always flatter poor recordings; lack of a true lid

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A superb turntable that delivers stunning performance across a huge swathe of different music

FEATURES



OVERALL





HEIMDALL 2

FREY 2

TYR 2

NORSE 2 CABLES

SUPERIOR TECHNOLOGY, SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE

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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



and it also times better than many reflex port speaker designs of its size. The bass is deep yet even, taut and tight and remarkably devoid of lumpy colorations. The smooth, sophisticated bass extends up seamlessly to the midband, with little sense of crossing over. The midband is in turn open and detailed, giving a far wider and deeper sound than you would expect from a smallish speaker like this. Rush's *Tom Sawyer* is a joy. The AE309 conveys the intensity and passion of Neil Peart's drumming, yet neatly separates it out from all the other strands of the mix. Singer Geddy Lee's high-pitched vocals are unexpectedly smooth, and hover in the centre of the mix with confidence. On top of this, the song's multiple layers of guitars and synthesisers are all clear to hear. The best thing is how this speaker pieces everything together. The music sounds very coherent and structured, yet lyrical and lucid too.

Treble is also smooth. There's no sense of clanging metal dome tweeters, yet the tweeter conveys the sound of drumsticks on cymbals very impressively at the price.

On Karajan's reading of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* with the Berlin Philharmonic, there is a slight opacity right towards the rear of the hall – plus a subtle loss of atmosphere. Yet still it locates images convincingly and has a far wider soundstage than I expect given its cabinet size. Stage depth isn't great, but the music flows cogently, sounding fast and expressive, yet smooth and civilised.

Conclusion

The AE309 may look a little meek, but certainly doesn't sound it. When partnered with good amplification it delivers a very grown-up rendition of whatever type of music you choose to play. It might be pitched at an extremely competitive price point, but this floorstander will deliver your music with plenty of passion. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE309

PRICE
From £999

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
22kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
175 x 900 x 280mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm
aluminium
dome tweeter
• 1x 130mm
mid/bass driver
• 1x 130mm
bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
89dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy
Loudspeakers Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 654432

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 442

Acoustic Energy AE309

Although the AE309 is a thoroughly conventional box loudspeaker, AE's engineers have honed the design and introduced a myriad of improvements, including better drive units and cabinet construction.

A 2.5-way design, it gets the company's 25mm aluminium dome tweeter that sports its so-called Wide Dispersion Technology. Aluminium is a light and stiff metal that when used correctly can be very effective as a drive unit. Indeed, it also surfaces in the 130mm mid/bass driver, this time sandwiched between two layers of ceramic. The AE309 gets two, working in parallel to give the effective air moving abilities of a much larger single cone, while being able to preserve the speaker's neat, narrow tower proportions. The cone material is claimed to be very stiff but well damped, with an ultra-high

force, long-throw motor system. Power handling and dispersion are also said to be improved over previous designs.

Sound quality

This floorstander has been really well done – and the result is that it has impressive bass extension, without losing anything in terms of speed and attack. Manix's *Hold Dis* is a slice of classic techno/drum and bass and has really powerful, grumbling sub-bass. Playing the AE309 at a highish volume, I fully expect it to groan under the strain – and maybe for the cones to hit their end stops. Yet it doesn't happen and the AE doesn't slur the bass notes, nor does it deliver an extra bit of boom down South, in order to swell the sound to give the impression of greater size. Indeed, it does better in the bass than it should given its fairly diminutive dimensions,



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth, expansive sound; taut bass; musicality

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Excellent affordable compact floorstander



DOORSTANDING SPEAKER



Bowers & Wilkins

703 S2

With its Continuum midrange cone and new Carbon tweeter, this mid-series floorstander is packed with promising tech

As the penultimate big box in B&W's 700 S2 series, the 703 S2 is the one to buy if you want maximum punching power, but cannot afford the 702 S2. The company has raised its game with this range, and the key is the new Continuum cone, which outperforms B&W's Kevlar design comprehensively – being much more linear in the way it breaks up, and less prone to breaking up under load in the first place. Another improvement is the company's new 25mm Carbon tweeter, which measures and sounds far better than the outgoing aluminium tweeter. This crosses over to the 150mm Continuum FST midrange driver, which is decoupled from the main box and has an FEA-optimised aluminium chassis said to be stiffer

In hi-fi terms it sounds less processed, with a greater sense of realism and clarity

than the zinc of the outgoing CM Series, with a tuned mass damper on the front face. The midband driver crosses over to two 165mm Aerofoil Profile bass units, which are bolted to the front baffle. These drivers use paper rather than carbon fibre skins, with the sandwich filling material being EPS, rather than the syntactic foam used in the 800 Series Diamond. The cabinet is a solid bit of kit, and is pretty dull sounding when rapped with a knuckle. It's nicely finished, with a choice of gloss black, satin white and rosenut. While it's possible to use the 703 S2 on its own, for best results you should use the supplied base – which makes the speaker more stable. Round the back is the so-called 'Flowport' bass port, but despite this you can push it quite close to a boundary wall; 30cm seems a good compromise. There's a neat, two-stage foam bung if you need to push

it closer back. The manufacturer recommends you use it with an amplifier of between 30 to 200W, and claims a nominal impedance of 8ohm.

Sound quality

If you're already familiar with B&W's CM9 predecessor, there are many similarities. Music sounds crisp and lively with a pleasantly rhythmic gait. There is no sense of the 703 S2 being a shrinking violet, rather it knuckles down and does the job – pushing out a powerful, gutsy yet propulsive sound. It offers substantially more detail and insight. There is greater focus to the sound, instruments appear more tangible, as if they are organic things rather than synthetic. In hi-fi terms the 703 S2 is less processed sounding, with a greater sense of realism and clarity.

It's revealing to play recordings that are not the best. Dexy's Midnight Runners' *Geno* is a classic pop song, recorded at the very end of the seventies, seemingly in someone's garage. The B&W seems surprisingly unconcerned with the lo-fi, grungy production and instead dives right into the groove of the song, pushing out the wide recorded acoustic. Within this it is clear to hear the raucous brass sound that contrasts so perfectly with the fulsome bass guitar playing. Meanwhile, singer Kevin Rowland's slightly anaemic voice is conveyed with great immediacy, really capturing the spirit of the occasion. Against its more expensive 702 S2 bigger brother, there is a slight lessening of detail and diminution of clarity, and a subtle sense that the stereo image is being constrained.

Moving to some classic nineties ambient techno, and Age of Love's *Age Of Love* is a blast. It is a big and confident loudspeaker at the price, its bass response is well extended yet not overpowering. There is no sense of it struggling with the prodigious amount of low-frequency energy on this track, nor does it err towards compression at high volume levels.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins
703 S2

PRICE
£2,399

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
25kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
320 x 1,025 x 321mm

FEATURES
● 1x 25mm Carbon
dome tweeter
● 1x 150mm
Continuum
midrange driver
● 2x 165mm Aerofoil
bass drivers
● Quoted sensitivity:
89dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 433

Instead it serves up an immersive and engaging sound, with a good deal of insight into the texture of the classic analogue synthesisers used. Rhythmically it's a deft performer, although it is still not quite the tightest and tautest in the business. For me what impresses is the combination of physicality, dynamics and the ability to follow the groove with real zeal. It's not a gushingly emotional performer, and doesn't give a heightened sense of musical drama, yet it really lets you into the recording and unlocks it for you to enjoy.

Feed it a modern jazz track such as Cannonball Adderly's *Autumn Leaves*, and it conjures up a big recorded acoustic, and invites the listener into this classic recording – made with a pair of crossed microphones, old-school style. Tonally it is commendably smooth, and so makes a fine fist of reproducing the beautiful acoustic instruments. Miles Davis' superlative trumpet playing never screeches, yet it always has a realistic rasp. Cymbals are pleasingly subtle and well resolved with a lovely natural sheen, yet refuse to sound overly bright. Bass is taut and tight; ever so slightly dry sounding one might say, but still highly enjoyable.

Conclusion

A very accomplished all-rounder designed to be a great loudspeaker for a wide spectrum of prospective purchasers, the 703 S2 is a highly impressive performer at the price. It sets out to be a Jack of all trades and master of some, and unquestionably succeeds. It seems to enjoy playing any type of music, goes loud very cleanly, is not too demanding to drive and never shows a bad side. The only downside is the existence of its bigger and more expensive brother – the 702 S2 – which is better still, if you have an extra £900 in your back pocket. Well worth an audition, this seems destined to make many friends. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Power and punch; detail; even tonal balance

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Lacks focus of its more expensive 702 S2 sibling

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Excellent all-rounder with wide appeal

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

DOORSTANDING SPEAKER



Falcon Acoustics RAM Studio 30

A familiar name to UK audiophiles, Falcon is back and this three-way floorstander shows that the brand is set to fly again

Although gracefully slim, the Studio 30 stands over 1,100mm tall on its spiked metal plinth with screw fixings, which raises the cabinet's large downward-firing port from the ground. The custom-designed 25mm soft dome tweeter is offset, meaning it can be either inside or outside the centre axis depending on which way round the speakers are sited. Convention dictates inside, but much hinges on the room's size and shape and it never hurts to experiment.

No prizes for guessing that the Studio 30 is a three-way design, but award yourself a bonus point for spotting the proprietary 50mm dome midrange unit, a driver type more usually associated with ATC and PMC. It shares the baffle with two 170mm polypropylene cone bass drivers.

It reveals harmonics, dynamic contrasts and proportion that align with reality

Of all the Studio models, the 30, unsurprisingly, is claimed to have the widest bandwidth, the clearest midrange and the most even tonal balance top to bottom. And if that large downward-firing port suggests anything, it's powerful deep bass. So although the claimed 89dB sensitivity rating promises ample loudness for a modest investment of watts, an amp with more than a modicum of low-end grip would be a good move. Prices start at £3,495 if you go for the European walnut finish, climb to £3,925 for high gloss black as tested and £4,095 for burr walnut.

Sound quality

Auditioning commences with Yamaha's CD-N301 network CD player (HFC 401) and Emotiva BasX PT-100 preamp's on-board AD1955 24/192 chip from Analog Devices taking care of digital conversion while

the matching A-300 power amplifier (both reviewed HFC 429) drives the speakers via lengths of Townshend Isolda DCT loudspeaker cable.

Hi-fi is all about illusion and even with large and expensive multi-driver exemplars of the floorstanding art, it's hard to shake the feeling that you're listening to a reconstruction, however exquisitely sewn together. But the Studio 30 gets closer than most. Give it something with a raw, 'live' patina and it's almost scarily convincing. Playing Boz Scaggs' *Out Of The Blues*, the Falcon could almost have been built for the task. Except that nothing about the presentation sounds like a task. What's so striking is the absence of effort, the sense of absolute solidity and authority, a weight and potency redolent of a living, breathing, dynamic musical event. Boz and the boys might as well be sat playing in the room with me.

But that's relatively simple stuff. A step-up in scale and complexity requires a little more from the talent well. For example, a well-recorded orchestra's string section should have some harmonic roughage amid the silky wash and brass instrumental tonal depth that goes beyond bright, raspy and metallic. Take almost any Michael Bublé production and whatever you think of the Canadian's caramel crooning, the orchestral backing is always immaculately recorded, sometimes just a tad 'hot', which can tip some speakers into aggression. The Studio 30, however, totally nails it, revealing a whole world of harmonics and dynamic contrasts, but just as importantly a sense of proportion that aligns more closely with reality. The Falcon has no need to exaggerate or manipulate. Yes, it has great bass – and not just the kind that makes Marcus Miller's Fender Jazz Bass guitar on latest album outing, *Laid Black*, sound palpably fatter and gutsier. Here's a speaker that marries oodles of low frequency energy with definition and

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Falcon Acoustics
RAM Studio 30

PRICE
From £3,495

ORIGIN
UK/Italy

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
35kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 1,100 x 300mm

FEATURES
● 1x 25mm soft
dome tweeter
● 1x 50mm
soft dome
midrange driver
● 2x 170mm
Polypropylene
bass drivers
● Quoted sensitivity:
89dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma-AV

TELEPHONE
01423 358846

WEBSITE
karma-av.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 442

discipline and it's a combination that doesn't just bring low notes to life, but also the acoustic and ambient glow of the venue they're played in.

So let's draw a line here. This isn't the kind of speaker that tries to ambush your attention with the ear-popping pizzazz some similarly priced systems trade in. Instead, you might notice the sheer range of subtle tonal colours on offer with the stripped-down arrangements that take precedence on Paul Weller's latest album, *True Meanings*. On the other hand, the Studio 30 can run with the most outrageous dynamic swings, but does so in a perfectly calm and controlled fashion so that there's never any hint of hype. This is the calibre of stuff that, in the long run, draws you in and keeps you hooked. In short, the Studio 30 doesn't overplay its hand. It has poise and control that's never found wanting.

This puts this loudspeaker in true high-end territory. It handles the frequency extremes beautifully, but the transparency and sheer naturalness of its midrange is sublime, eschewing the tickled-up presence favoured by some for believable balance and detail that serves the music rather than detracting from it.

Conclusion

With roots that reach back to the early days of KEF and a portfolio that contains what many regard as the finest modern-day reproduction of the classic LS3/5a, it's probably fair to say that Falcon Acoustics invites preconceptions of a loudspeaker maker stuck in the past. Nothing could be further from the truth. The RAM Studio 30 is a potent, wide-bandwidth speaker system that balances its dynamic reach and ability to go loud with grace, warmth, terrific resolving power and a feeling of spatial coherence that ranks with the very best. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



LIKE: Effortless power, scale and authority; midrange transparency; build and finish
DISLIKE: Nothing of note

WE SAY: A very serious floorstander that does credit to a revitalised Falcon Acoustics

OVERALL



DOORSTANDING SPEAKER



Focal Kanta N°2

Introducing a loudspeaker that seeks to mix high style with sublime sonics and manages to tick the boxes on both counts

At a pound under £7,000, the Kanta N°2's price is firmly in aspirational territory for most, yet it costs a breezy £3k less than the Sopra N°2 from the next tier up in Focal's 'high-end' portfolio. Little wonder that it took three years of research and development to see the light of day.

This is the first Focal to combine its flax sandwich cone tech for the midrange and bass drivers with the company's lauded pure beryllium tweeter. By sandwiching flax fibre between two thin layers of glass fibre, the resulting cone is claimed to have high internal damping and high flexural rigidity. It's used in three of the Kanta's drivers. Both the 165mm midrange and two bass units benefit from Focal's so-called Tuned Mass Damping (TMD) and, to stabilise the

management also falls to the four-footed Zamac (metal alloy) base structure, which hoists the enclosure at least 60mm from the floor, slightly more if the adjustable spikes are used. It's a good look, as is the dark glass plate that dresses the top panel.

It doesn't take long to get things to the fine-tuning stage and it's pretty close to the initial intuitive placement – about a metre away from the rear wall and only slightly less from the side walls, with a mild degree of toe-in. Any closer to boundaries and the fulsome, well-extended bass gets just too much of a helping hand.

Sound quality

Even with the extraordinary detail resolution on offer from a front end comprising my Cambridge Audio CX3 CD transport (HFC 401) and Chord Electronics Hugo 2 (HFC 428), the Kanta doesn't fixate on the forensic at the expense of the larger musical picture. Spinning up *Sister* from Tracey Thorn's latest album *Record* – basically Everything But The Girl after a double dose of Barocca – the sound is revealing and rich with a firm grasp of tempo and rhythm, but most importantly, the music ebbs and flows with a lucidity that nearly always evades lesser speakers trying perhaps a little too hard to impress. There isn't much to snag your attention in a purely hi-fi sense, not even the preternatural clarity of the beryllium tweeter. It wasn't always the case, but after years of assiduous development and evolution its contribution is seamlessly integrated.

Walk into the room with the Kanta playing and the tendency is to relax a little – even if the volume is motoring on and Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Jerusalem* is approaching its shuddering climax. With the eternally gorgeous *Bittersweet* from Lewis Taylor's eponymously titled 1996 debut, it's the deft dynamic shading, the absence of strain, the panoply of tonal textures and colours and the seductively sumptuous yet supple bass that

conspire to draw you into a truly immersive, zero-fatigue listen.

There's nothing particularly sketchy, impressionistic or editorialised about the speaker's presentation. Nor does it seem in the least processed, hyped or manipulated. But plenty of flesh on the bones? Most definitely. Here's a speaker with real bandwidth, grip and insight that delivers music in a tangible, coherent way with excellent weight, drive and rhythmic impetus. And it's that breadth of talent – which is easy to hear straight away – that separates the Kanta from the less expensive options that over achieve against cost but over promise in terms of longer-term musical satisfaction. And it's here that the Kanta really begins to justify its elevated but far from extravagant asking price.

Conclusion

In a sense, the Kanta expands and elaborates on the qualities that have kept the £3k DALI Rubicon 6 (HFC 399) as a floorstanding reference in my larger listening room for such a long time. As with that speaker, the need, however subliminal, to make allowances for the volume of the enclosure, the number of drive units and the success or otherwise of their integration fades away and an immersive sense of realism takes over. I come back time and again to the release, the letting go, the relaxation. It really is a kind of watershed, the place where the power of the music, rather than the limitations of the transducer, commands the listening experience.

Style is a personal thing and, even by Focal's standards, the Kanta N°2 is strong medicine, and I'm not sure I could live with the review pair without redecorating the room. It probably tells you something about the sound quality that I'd do it in a flash. If you want more than a taste of the real high-end, the Focal Kanta N°2 is a fabulous place to start. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Focal Kanta N°2

PRICE
£6,999

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
35kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
321 x 1,118 x 477mm

FEATURES
• 1x 27mm beryllium tweeter
• 1x 165mm flax midrange driver
• 2x 165mm flax bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity: 91dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Focal-JMLab UK Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0845 6602680

WEBSITE
focal.com/UK

REVIEWED
HFC 435

It doesn't fixate on the forensic at the expense of the larger musical picture

magnetic field, its Neutral Inductance Circuit (NIC) – the overarching goal being better control and definition with lower colouration.

Meanwhile, the big, time-aligned full-length baffle isn't just a treat for the retina. Part of the R&D phase was taken up researching a new material that would combine high rigidity with favourable acoustic properties. The result is a high-density polymer (HDP) which, Focal asserts, is superior to MDF, being 70 percent denser, 15 percent more rigid and 25 percent better damped. The smooth, angled edges are to defeat diffraction and allow sound waves to 'effortlessly flow across the surface'. And the overall rigidity of the structure is bolstered by the rear part of the enclosure, which is internally braced and constructed from moulded multi-ply wood.

There are two bass reflex ports, one front, one rear, while a degree of bass

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Gorgeous sound quality; super build; impeccable finish

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Full-on style statement that's likely to split opinion

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A not inconsiderable investment for a very considerable sound. A terrific loudspeaker

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

DOORSTANDING SPEAKER



Neat Acoustics Iota Xplorer

Six years on from the original Iota, Neat is back with a third speaker in the series, but this one has been considerably scaled up

Despite being classed as a 2.5-way floorstanding design, the manner in which the Xplorer mounts its drivers is fairly unusual. It uses one of Neat's 170mm P1/R3 mid/bass drivers partnered with an Air Motion Transformer (AMT) style tweeter, which represents the first time that such a device has been used in a Neat speaker. Thanks to its large radiating area, it should give the Xplorer an even higher frequency dispersion.

These two drivers are placed in a sealed chamber at the top of the cabinet, which will naturally limit the bass extension the mid/bass driver can achieve. To solve this, the lower section of the cabinet houses more drivers. These take the form of a pair of Neat's P1/R2 bass units (a similar construction to the mid/bass driver,

of the units, but when they are relatively far apart and your listening position is nearfield, you can position them so the tweeters are inwards to improve the stereo focus a little.

The fit and finish is extremely good with the cabinets feeling solid and very inert, but aesthetically the Xplorer is likely to divide opinion. I can't say that I'm terribly fond of the satin white finish of the review sample, but in its oak and walnut wood options, I rather like the almost retro feel it gives off and this is further enhanced by a selection of coloured grille options.

Sound quality

If you are on the fence about the appearance of the Xplorer, it is likely that a listening session will quickly bring you around. In behavioural terms, it has many attributes that I have experienced in other Neat Acoustics speakers over the years, although there are some intriguing differences, too. Where business is very much as usual is the rhythmic assurance that the Xplorer brings to music. The shifting soulful *What Color Is Love?* by Terry Callier is not an inherently funky album, but the timing is integral to its presentation and the Xplorer is effortlessly able to convey the flow and beat of *You Goin' Miss Your Candyman* in a way that can seem deceptively easy at times. The more important the tempo is to the piece, the better it gets.

This is allied to superb bass response. The isobaric driver pairing gives the Xplorer the ability to hit harder than anything else of a similar size, but it is the control and speed it possesses that's really noteworthy. *Telephasic Workshop* by Boards Of Canada is delivered with a sensational combination of weight and agility that pulls you into the track and engages on an emotional level as much as a cerebral one.

Where the Xplorer really begins to build on these traditional Neat virtues is with the upper registers.

The Air Motion Transformer is beautifully integrated with the conventional drivers and imparts a real sense of space and three dimensionality to music that is effortless but addictive.

Listening to the 24/96 download of Max Richter's rework of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, the Xplorer arranges the orchestra in a manner that is utterly self-explanatory. You are treated to the performance opening out in a full arc in front of you, extending well beyond the physical placement of the speakers themselves.

The treble effortlessly balances detail and energy with a refinement that is hard to provoke even with very poor recordings, making this a phenomenal all-rounder. In fact, its only real vice is that it needs a reasonable listening level to really come alive. At lower levels, it can sound a little constrained and some of the bass impact is lost. Once you have hit the level it likes, though, you can keep pushing it up without any apparent sense of strain or harshness. Neither does it require a huge amount of power to achieve this – Neat's claim of 88dB sensitivity and a nominal impedance of 60hm seems to be entirely believable in use.

Conclusion

The Xplorer does everything I expect from a Neat Acoustics design and brings some new abilities into play as well. The result is a loudspeaker that goes about handling pretty much any genre of music with a disarming combination of total rhythmic assurance and superb three dimensionality. While it is undeniably a curious-looking floorstander, spend some time in its company and the thinking behind it begins to make a lot of sense. The Xplorer is more than an evolution of the Iota loudspeaker series, it's a fresh leap in design thinking and it sounds nothing short of sensational. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Neat Acoustics
Iota Xplorer

PRICE
£3,495

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
18kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
300 x 740 x 220mm

FEATURES
• 1x AMT tweeter
• 1x 170mm
mid/bass driver
• 2x 170mm
bass drivers in
an isobaric array
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m (60hm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Neat Acoustics Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01833 631021

WEBSITE
neatacoustics.com

REVIEWED
HFC 435

The AMT tweeter imparts a real sense of space and three dimensionality

but without the metal phase plug). The drivers are arranged in tandem firing downwards, acting as an isobaric pair to ensure plenty of low-end ability. Finally, the lower section of the cabinet has a rear-mounted circular bass port.

The cabinet shape follows the same form as its smaller siblings, although the proportions have shifted slightly to better partner the drivers being used. In terms of placement, it doesn't present too many challenges getting it to work happily in my listening room. The downward-firing bass drivers mean the Xplorer works best on a solid floor and I find that placed at least 30cm away from a wall gives optimum performance in my room.

As the speakers are 'handed', you can experiment with the tweeters facing inwards or outwards. Neat confirms the Xplorer is voiced with the tweeters positioned on the outside

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



LIKE: Lively, spacious and involving sound; easy to drive; build

DISLIKE: Looks a little odd; needs reasonable volume levels

WE SAY: An unusual design, but one that delivers a superbly engaging musical performance

OVERALL



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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER

cranked-up guitars, right into the studio. It responds faster, has quieter silences and greater spaces between the notes resulting in a more dynamic and propulsive sound.

It won't sweeten a sour-sounding piece in the way the original did, however, cue up a really good eighties recording, such as Prefab Sprout's *Appetite* and I'd take the new version any day. There's still a pleasingly smooth and subtly sweet demeanour, but less cabinet coloration makes for more music and less overhang. The result is a more open, expressive sort of performance that gets deeper into the recording. You find yourself connecting more emotionally, and paying less attention to the hi-fi.

This is never more apparent than with electronic music. Take Uncle Bob's *Burly House*, where as soon as the Roland TB-303 bass synthesiser line kicks in we're enjoying large tracts of well controlled low frequencies that counterpoint with the looping hi-hat cymbal sound up top. This is silkier and more distinct than the 3050, which seems a little muted and vague by comparison.

Lou Donaldson's *One Cylinder* boasts a cavernous soundstage through the correct loudspeaker, and the 3050i rises to the occasion. Instruments are located solidly, with the rolling cymbals far to the right, trumpet closer in, tenor sax stage left and the fast and lyrical guitar centre stage. The recorded acoustic is genuinely convincing; so much so that I have to keep reminding myself I am listening to an inexpensive floorstander.

Conclusion

A substantial improvement on its predecessor, it's almost as if adding a simple 'i' suffix doesn't do justice to how much better the 3050i really is. If you're looking for a largish, high value for money floorstander then this has to be the first model on your audition list; it may be the last, too. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Big, open sound; lithe, musical character; efficiency

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Gloss option no longer available

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Great value, this is the budget floorstander to beat

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Q Acoustics 3050i

According to Q Acoustics brand director Alex Munro, the brand's *raison d'être* is to make cheap, affordable, high-value loudspeakers that sound far better than they have any right to – and the 3050i absolutely personifies this. It's big, has three drive units and goes loud from only a small amount of power – what's not to like?

The biggest problem with a low-cost loudspeaker, especially a large one like this, is the cabinet. The 3050i sports the company's point-to-point bracing. Cabinet strengthening is nothing new, but Q Acoustics has made a concerted attempt to do it right; the parts of the enclosure that need to be stiffened have received attention to stop flexing. This is said to be a variation on what it has learned with its flagship Concept 500 (HFC 426), done down to a price of

course. Interestingly, conventional terminal panel cut-outs have been removed, giving improved structural integrity. The new low-profile binding posts are also a big improvement on what came before, and are able to accept 4mm banana plugs.

In my listening room, I sit this speaker about 50cm from the rear wall with the foam bung in place. It's worth experimenting, as the bung gives a tighter but less relaxed sound.

Sound quality

The 3050i is light, tight, fast and open – with a clean and crisp treble, transparent midband and bass that's slightly less weighty but obviously more articulate than the original 3050 floorstander (HFC 398). With AC/DC's *Whole Lotta Rosie* the 3050i is insightful enough to really scythe its way into the dense mix, past all those multi-tracked, fuzz-drenched,

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics 3050i

PRICE
£649

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
17.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
310 x 1,020 x 310mm

FEATURES
● 1x 22mm soft dome tweeter
● 2x 165mm mid/bass drivers
● Quoted sensitivity: 91dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 438

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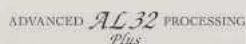
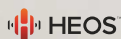
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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



amp that requires its own power station to be sold a sense of space, substance and slam. Actually, it's the smallest driver that can make the biggest impact. Feed a highly transparent, fast and linear tweeter the right spatial cues and you're half way there. Few DACs are more resolute than Chord's Hugo 2 and if the M-6 has to use a little physics-defying tuning manipulation to fill out the lower frequencies, its ribbon leaves you in no doubt that it's the Chord's transient information that ultimately sets the agenda.

The M-6 doesn't only deliver a surprisingly three-dimensional and tactile sound, it does so with exquisite touch and unstrained musicality. Its delivery is flowing, fluent and easy breathing. Presentation of fine detail is beguilingly natural rather than conspicuously spotlit.

Jazz fusion saxophonist David Sanborn's 1980 album *Hideaway* is a masterclass in lean, quicksilver, delicately detailed Michael Colina production and, above all, wide open presentation of raw sax power. The M-6 simply nails it. Sanborn's alto has rasp, resonance and finger clicks, Michael Brecker's tenor bite, body and breathy warmth. Marcus Miller on bass and synth meshes perfectly with Ray Marotta on drums in providing palpable rhythmic impetus and structure. This music motors, it gels, and sounds simply fabulous.

Conclusion

The test of a fine loudspeaker is really quite simple. It must allow the real character of any recording to shine through: the contrasts, the textures, the tempo, the dynamics, the emotion. The Scansonic M-6 certainly isn't the loudest or most forceful bijou floorstander you'll ever hear, but it prosecutes its musical mission with a degree of insight and finesse that belies its price. A taste of Raidho for shallower pockets? Spot on. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Sweet, sophisticated sound; slim profile; finish

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not the heaviest hitter

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Best suited to smaller rooms, but a class act in every sense

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Scansonic M-6

PRICE
£1,199

ORIGIN
Denmark/China

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
15.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
151 x 900 x 198mm

FEATURES
• 1x Kapton/
aluminium ribbon
tweeter
• 2x 114mm paper/
polypropylene
mid/bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
89dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Decent Audio

TELEPHONE
05602 054669

WEBSITE
decentaudio.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 436

Scansonic M-6

Mirroring its MB series, the M-6 is designed around an ultra-light ribbon planar tweeter. Its membrane is formed by a Kapton and aluminium sandwich just 20µm thick with an extremely low mass – Scansonic estimates 50 times less than any conventional textile or ceramic, beryllium or diamond-coated dome, the aim being higher resolution and lower colouration rather than sky-high frequency response, though the 30kHz ceiling is more than adequate.

Because it sits so snugly beneath, the 114mm mid/bass driver almost looks like a material extension of the tweeter. It uses a paper-polypropylene cone and underhung magnet system and, being part of a 2.5-way system, there's a second identical driver beneath that takes on the bulk of bass duties, working between 50 and 300Hz. The mid/bass unit hands over

to the tweeter at 3.5kHz via a second order filter. The speaker is provided with a substantial screw-in plinth (not shown) to tilt the enclosure back a few degrees so the tweeter fires up towards the listening position.

Sound quality

I hook the M-6 up to a Cambridge Audio CXC CD transport (HFC 401), Chord Electronics Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428) and ATC CA-2 preamp and P1 power amp. Too much? No, the speaker loves it. Pulled a little way clear of walls and limbering up with Dvorák's *New World Symphony*, the first thing that occurs to me is: how can so much scale, instrumental separation and air be coming from such titchy boxes? And the answer is resolution. Resolution and some clever voicing and port tuning. The M-6 shows you don't need a speaker that blocks out the sun driven by an

DOORSTANDING SPEAKER



Spendor

A7

Is it possible for an unassuming, slim and starkly functional two-way speaker to deliver the Spendor sound in full? You bet it is...

With its four-strong entry-level A-Line family, the aim is to deliver Spendor know-how, craft and experience to a wider audience. Take the range-topping A7. From a distance, it looks too simple and plain for a speaker just under £3k.

If you measure value in terms of material real estate, the A7 simply isn't going to float your boat, but fans of neat and *petite* should appreciate its modest height and footprint and take comfort from Spendor's assertion that it sounds anything but small. Making life more convenient still, the fourth-generation Spendor linear flow port (at the base on the rear) is said to work even quite close to a boundary.

The 180mm mid/bass driver is a new Spendor design with a polymer cone and revised surround and

Impressive bass weight and extension with terrific agility and tunefulness

suspension materials said to deliver exemplary thermal and mechanical stability. High power handling and good low-level linearity were also on the job sheet. It's paired with Spendor's 22mm 'wide surround' tweeter, which strives to combine the extended frequency response of a small diaphragm with the low-frequency characteristics of a larger diaphragm, the intended upshot being stable, low distortion response over a very wide frequency range. Wide dispersion is also claimed, broadening the listening 'sweet spot'. The crossover network has been afforded the same level of refinement. It features precision-wound, high-linearity tapped inductors, which are said to avoid the distortion caused by attenuating resistors and allow very fine tuning of both frequency and phase response, necessary to achieve a coherent, balanced sound.

The gathering weight of opinion challenging the convention that speakers should have high density cabinet panels and mass damping to minimise 'cabinet talk' finds a powerful advocate in Spendor, which argues that with this type of build spurious energy is stored and released slowly, sitting on timing and rhythmic snap. There are plenty of cures that eschew internal wadding and mass. Spendor's is called Dynamic Damping and uses small, low-mass constrained polymer dampers in the cabinet that "convert the spurious energy in the cabinet into inaudible heat".

The base of the speaker has four machined steel stabiliser inserts set directly into the cabinet. The reason, states Spendor, is that any micro movement or flexing of the plinth and feet blurs fine detail and destroys ambient cues and the A7's sturdy metal perimeter prevents that, especially if used with the chunky supplied adjustable spikes.

Sound quality

The first CD up for inspection is Michael Jackson's *Scream* compilation and *Thriller* neatly generates a broad first impression. Maybe just a hint of BBC reserve and polite neutrality? Nowhere to be heard. On the contrary, the A7 sounds much bigger and bouncier than you'd ever guess from looking at it, with well-projected presentation combining impressive bass weight and extension with terrific agility and tunefulness. This is not to be confused with the kind of artfully revved up presentational style that blows you away for 30 seconds then gradually becomes harder to take seriously. No, with an appropriate dose of volume, it's what a natural sense of life, pace and musical verve sounds like and keeps you wanting more.

Dextrous jazz fusion guitarist Larry Coryell went through a phase of fridge-chilled funk in the mid-nineties and, thus flavoured, his version of the *St. Louis Blues* from *I'll Be Over*

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Spendor A7

PRICE
£2,995

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
18kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
180 x 934 x 305mm

FEATURES
• 1x 22mm
polyamide
dome tweeter
• 1x 180mm
polymer cone
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Spendor Audio
Systems Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01323 843474

WEBSITE
spendoraudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 440

You challenges a speaker's ability to capture contrast with a striking and very sudden change of mood. The track begins in true gritty acoustic blues fashion – spare, steely guitar phrases; Don Harrison's gruff, slightly echoey vocal; simple mic placements for authentic atmosphere. It all sounds raw, tactile and dripping with attitude through the Spendor. But 37 seconds in it's as if a group of renegades from Funk Central crash through the roof and hijack the track with extreme 'dig this' prejudice. Coryell's faithful Gibson Super 400 electric guitar is joined by Chuck Loeb on rhythm, Mark Sherman on keyboards and Zach Danziger on drums and bluesy angst is replaced with a rich, smooth, densely layered groove in a heartbeat. The A7 just isn't fazed by the jokey suddenness of the stylistic shift, but seems to be in on the conceit, delivering a sonic wink in the form of an opening bass note sweep with visceral presence and extension that all but dives through the floor. The whole thing hinges on delivering just the right amount of dynamic emphasis and the A7 absolutely nails it.

It does so time and again. But the svelte Spendor also has a special talent for the small stuff – not just its command of musical nuance and laser-locked precision with timing, but its ability to resolve subtle ambient cues right down to the noise floor. It all makes for an addictively transparent, engaging, rhythmically sussed and endlessly enjoyable loudspeaker.

Conclusion

Anyone who thinks Spendor is a bit 'old-school stuffy' needs to hear the A7 urgently. Leave your preconceptions at the door. It sounds modern in the best possible way: fast, clear and open with fine dynamic expression, great bass and an unerring instinct for the musical pulse. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



LIKE: Transparency; terrific musicality; bass; compact size; build and finish

DISLIKE: Grilles are an optional extra

WE SAY: Comfortably one of the most talented floorstanders we've reviewed at this price point

OVERALL



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WHAT HI-FI?



STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



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RECOMMENDED

Acoustic Energy AE300

A compact standmount, the AE300 is designed for small-to-medium sized rooms and sports 18mm-thick MDF cabinet walls in a standard box shape. Extensive internal damping has been used to reduce colouration and bracing technology derived from Acoustic Energy's Reference Series is employed. To the rear is a slot-shaped reflex port, said to reduce the effect of air turbulence.

Both drive units are bespoke designs rather than being bought off the shelf from external suppliers. The mid/bass unit is a 130mm affair with a new ceramic/aluminium sandwich cone with a shallow profile, and long-throw motor system. A new 28mm aluminium tweeter has been developed, which is said to offer high power handling and low distortion, allied to good dispersion thanks to the company's Wide Dispersion Technology (WDT) waveguide. The two drivers cross over at 2.8kHz; the crossover itself is a third-order, 11-component impedance-matched and phase-aligned design. Multi-stranded OFC wiring is chosen for its matching electrical properties to the copper coil windings in the drive

units, says the company. Round the back, a single pair of sturdy speaker binding posts is fitted.

Sound quality

The AE300 performs very much like the more affordable AE100, except there's more of it. Rather like Spinal Tap's guitar amp that goes up to 11, this standmount offers the same basic punchy and animated sound, but it's bigger, bolder and more assertive. It's also a more subtle and polished product, bringing greater insight into the recording rather than just focusing on the music's groove.

Feed it some simple electro in the shape of *Uncle Bob's Burly House*, and the AE300 sounds surprisingly large for something of such physical slender means. It has vast tracts of sub-bass that kick in at regular intervals and instead of coughing and wheezing, the speaker pumps it out like a good 'un. It's surprisingly tuneful too, considering the relatively small size of its mid/bass unit.

Warping back another two decades, Steve Hackett's *Star Of Sirius* is dense, textural and multi-layered, with plenty of dynamics courtesy of that big Phil Collins drum sound. The AE300 manages to unpack a large

amount of low-level detail, throwing out lots of subtle, nuanced information. It holds things together on crescendos commendably well, compressing far less than expected at high levels and letting the lustre of the recording shine through.

Playing 4hero's *Give In*, the AE300 conjures up a large soundstage that boldly goes – in my room at least – where few other small loudspeakers can. It's hard to design a small two-way that doesn't image well, but even given the benefit of its small size it excels. Strands of the mix are located with precision, and the central vocal sounds full and enveloping. The relaxed yet assured way that the speaker pushes the sound out into the room really impresses.

In truth, though, it isn't this aspect of the performance that really tugs on the heartstrings – it is the way that it gets into the groove. This track has a massive, sumptuous one and seems custom made for this little loudspeaker; things flow with a lovely gait. There's no sense that the AE300 is in a hurry, that it sounds showy or over eager to please. Rather, it just slips into any rhythm it can find and sidles its way through. I find myself really rather beguiled by how it carries the natural phrasing of the music, as well as subtle dynamic accenting that's really likable.

Conclusion

This is not a universal panacea – it doesn't do everything perfectly. Many will be keener to audition the AE309 floorstander with its octave or so of extra bass and greater ease at high volumes. However, its treble is good enough to get the job done, even though there are more sparkly sounding standmounts around at this price. What the AE300 does, it does very well and is always a pleasure to listen to – in its own way it makes music magic, and you can't ask for much more than that. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE300

PRICE
£599

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
175 x 300 x 260mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm tweeter
• 1x 130mm mid/
bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 654432

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 434

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Animated,
punchy sound;
usefully refined

DISLIKE: Nothing at
the price

WE SAY: Surprisingly
capable small speaker
with style to spare

★★★★★

H-ER YOUR FI



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STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



Amphion Argon1

It's been a good six years since we've seen anything from Amphion and while the original Argon1 was the winner of our standmount *Group Test* in HFC 353, it has recently undergone something of a refresh.

It retains its remarkably neat and compact design with the 25mm titanium dome tweeter mounted in the centre of a large waveguide that matches the diameter of the mid/bass drive unit. The tweeter hands over to a 133mm aluminium mid/bass driver at a relatively low 1.6kHz.

As part of the refresh, the mid/bass driver is augmented by a rear-mounted bass port that now sits directly behind it with the terminal panel placed above, which depending on your choice of speaker cable can result in the wire being visible from the top of the speaker. There's no bi-wiring facility. While a 316mm-tall speaker with a 133mm mid/bass driver doesn't sound like a recipe for large amounts of low end, Amphion quotes a surprising low frequency response of 45Hz at ± 3 dB, which is impressive for a speaker of this size. This is combined with a relatively benign impedance of 8ohm and a sensitivity of 86dB/1W/1m, which

should ensure it's a relatively easy load to drive for many amplifiers.

Sound quality

Provided that it isn't jammed up against a rear wall, the Argon1's cabinet is impressively decoupled from the space it is in. With a very slight toe-in, there is a large and very even sweet spot that works happily both nearfield and listening further back. Within this flexible listening position, it demonstrates an extremely spacious and three dimensional performance. The midrange in particular is exceptional, allowing A Fine Frenzy's *Almost Lover* to be reproduced without any perceived congestion or compression. Alison Sudol's lovely vocal turn has the scale and texture required to make her sound impressively real.

The biggest surprise is the bass response. Jan Garbarek's saxophone in *In Praise Of Dreams* is underpinned by some deep percussion and the Amphion does a better job than you might expect at relaying this with a force you feel as much as hear. What is notable is that the impact doesn't come at the cost of forcing a vast amount of air from the bass port. There is no sense of sluggishness or

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Amphion Argon1

PRICE
£1,040

ORIGIN
Finland

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
160 x 316 x 265mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm titanium
dome tweeter
• 1x 133mm
aluminium
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Auden Distribution
Ltd.

TELEPHONE
07917685759

WEBSITE
amphion.fi

REVIEWED
HFC 436

the distinctive 'whoomph' sound to low notes and everything starts and stops with thrilling alacrity.

This speed and sense of agility makes itself felt in almost everything that the Amphion does. The fast guitar work of Bjørne Berge's *Live In Europe* is delivered with nothing missing or subsumed in the relentless barrage of notes. This ability to pick recordings apart and reveal their inner workings doesn't mean the Argon1 will take poor recordings to pieces, though. Compression is dealt with well and all but the most low bit-rate internet radio remains listenable. Poorer-quality material can aggravate the high treble response so it comes across as fractionally forward, but this generally only becomes an issue at higher volumes.

What has more of a consistent effect on the Amphion is that some care should be taken when thinking about partnering equipment. While it isn't especially hard to drive, it has no trouble in showing the limitations of any equipment further up the chain. Connected to NAD's £3,000 M32 integrated amplifier the performance is excellent, but a test run with the supremely talented Rega Brio (HFC 422) isn't quite the knock out combination I'd expect. Some of that excellent bass response is lost and the effortless sense of space becomes slightly constrained. This may be as simple as the difference in output – the NAD claims three times more power than the Rega – but the Amphion definitely sounds superior with the more upmarket amplifier.

Conclusion

A slight fussiness to what it partners with best is the limit of any criticism for this remarkably entertaining little speaker. Its ability to fit into fairly confined spaces and show off its strengths of speed, clarity and musical joy in any environment is sure to win it many friends. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Fast, engaging transparent sound; unfussy placement

DISLIKE: Needs some care with choice of partnering electronics

WE SAY: A compact standmount capable of delivering excellent performance in many different settings

Our limited edition Herford Weightlifter is packing a punch in the art world. Personally signed by our founder and valued at £18,450, it is the perfect addition to any audiophile's collection. To sweeten the deal, we will throw in our new M 40 HV 1000 watts mono amplifier. Don't forget that you will need two of them for stereo. Be quick, as the offer is only available during our celebrations.

0
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www.ta-hifi.com

UK: www.kogaudio.com/ta

T+A

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



Bowers & Wilkins 606

As the larger standmount of B&W's sixth-generation edition of its entry-level 600 Series lineup, the 606 is likely to be the best seller, as the 685 S2 was before it. Along with its more voluminous cabinet comes a larger Continuum cone mid/bass driver and the same 25mm tweeter. Sturdy and functional is probably the best way to describe the build and finish and there's nothing wrong with that. The overall effect is smart enough to fool casual observers into thinking they're looking at the much pricier 706 S2, especially if they venture round the back where the terminal tray and dimpled airflow reflex port are identical. Behind their Continuum cones, though, the mid/bass drivers aren't quite the same. For the 600 Series, the motor system and chassis has been slimmed down and doesn't have a neodymium magnet. And while the decoupled, double dome aspect of the tweeter is the same, the aluminium dome lacks the 700 Series' rigidity-enhancing carbon coating or a housing that incorporates heat-sinking behind the dome. That said, the new tweeter uses an upgraded neodymium magnet and wears a new grille mesh from the 700

Series. Also, the dome has been repositioned slightly forward in its diaphragm in order to improve time alignment while internal components, such as inductors and bypass capacitors, are also welcome hand me downs from the 700 Series.

Sound quality

First up, is B&W's 707 S2 (£799) that impressed me in *HFC* 438 (see p41). In my smaller room with the Hegel H90 integrated amp fed by the Chord Electronics Hugo 2, its remarkable talent for filling a big space with confidence, authority and surprisingly solid and well-extended bass is less crucial. But confounding its small stature, it manages to conjure up a convincingly proportioned soundstage populated with believably scaled musicians and instruments. It's a presentation that marries body and weight with supple speed and agility and the ability to sustain a lovely rich, natural tonality and properly nuanced dynamic contrasts as the volume is pushed towards party levels.

Does the 606 sound like a close relation with less polished manners? In one sense, yes. In most others, no. For a start, it's less refined overall and its tweeter is a little more obvious.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins 606
PRICE
£549
ORIGIN
UK/China
TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT
6.9kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 345 x 300mm
FEATURES
• 1x 25mm aluminium double dome tweeter
• 1x 165mm Continuum cone mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd.
TELEPHONE
0800 2321513
WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 443

There's a lot of 'sss' going on in Christine And The Queens' *Girlfriend* and the 606 pushes into mild sibilance more readily, the 707 S2 staying silky. On less aggressively produced material this isn't an issue, but there's no question the 606 is the more 's-forward' of the two.

Whether this is down to voicing or simply the quality of the tweeter I wouldn't like to say, but whatever the reason, the slightly more forceful treble quality of the 606, together with its larger mid/bass driver and much bigger cabinet, has a profound effect on its sonic character. Expansive as the 700 Series baby's output is, the 606 sounds positively huge for its size and – quite a surprise this – more open, airy and expressive throughout the midrange. The resolution, ambient detail and honest-to-God transparency on offer here frankly beggars belief at the price. Allied to bass performance that digs half an octave deeper than the 707 S2 with less apparent effort, if a little more box colouration, Christine And The Queens step it up, sounding a tad less polished but palpably more potent and fun. Diana Krall – and jazz songstresses Basia and Lizz Wright, come to that – all sound smoother and sexier through the 707 S2, as you might expect. The 606 is no less insightful (if a little less subtle), but entertains on a scale and with an enthusiasm the more expensive 707 S2 can't quite match. That poses an interesting in-house choice. Life has just become a lot tougher for the circa-£500 competition.

Conclusion

Trickle-down tech can yield mixed results, but my time with the 606 shows that Bowers & Wilkins gets it right and its approach knocks this entry-level standmount out of the park. Right now, I can't think of a better way to spend around £550 on a standmount speaker. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



LIKE: Exceptional sound quality with outstanding midrange and bass

DISLIKE: Treble can sound too crisp; rather plain finish

WE SAY: Affordable cutting-edge tech and knockout performance for the money

OVERALL





exposure



exposure

Exposure Electronics Limited

Unit 18, Winston Business Centre, 43 Chartwell Road
Lancing, West Sussex, BN15 8TU, United Kingdom

www.exposurehifi.com

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



Bowers & Wilkins 707 S2

Replacing the CM Series in 2017, the 700 Series draws on tech trickled down from the company's flagship 800 Series – allowing Bowers & Wilkins to offer a taste of the cutting edge at a much more affordable price point. Its 25mm 'carbon dome' tweeter tech used in this mid series aims to bridge the gap between the aluminium double dome used in its entry-level 600 Series and the diamond dome that gives the 800 Series Diamond its name.

Also lifted from the 800 Series is the 'Continuum cone' mid/bass driver, albeit in shrunken 130mm form for the 707 S2. The Continuum cone is made from a new composite material that is woven in the Kevlar way and the intended upshot is a cleaner, sweeter, more open and neutral midband performance. In addition, Finite Element Analysis (FEA) is used to optimise the design of the driver's aluminium chassis and to depart from the limitations imposed on the outgoing CM Series with its heavier and less stiff zinc chassis.

The mid/bass unit further benefits from the presence of a tuned mass damper on the front face of the chassis to soak up any remaining resonance in the structure. And, adapted from

the system used by the 800 Series Diamond, it also enjoys a degree of decoupling from the main enclosure, once more helping to keep the vibrations where they should be.

Sound quality

What happens next is extraordinary. The 707 S2 fills the room with music – Diana Krall's achingly beautiful cover of the Eagles' *Desperado* to be exact. No catch, no caveats, no kidding. Naturally, I've had small standmounts in here before. None has sounded as large, confident and open, none so authoritative and well balanced. Some slimmer floorstanders have struggled to command the room in the way the 707 S2 does, yet it seems born to the task. Krall's dusky vocal, spare piano phrasings and lush string backdrop lean more on tonality, warmth and texture than tempo and timing, but the way these qualities are layered and anchored in a truly three-dimensional soundstage is no less astonishing.

Bass is outstandingly good on the end of the muscular Emotiva BasX PT-100/A-300 pre/power combo (HFC 329) with its high current delivery and tenacious grip. Although the large room gives low frequencies the space to properly propagate, the way these

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins
707 S2

PRICE
£799

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
165 x 280 x 260mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm carbon
dome tweeter
• 1x 130mm
Continuum cone
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
84dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 438

small speakers combine weight and extension with a decent measure of agility and tunefulness is, frankly, ace.

Spend at least twice as much and you can buy nuggety mini monitors that possess fast, dry, meticulously pitch-perfect bass. But you tend to play at higher levels to get any real sense of weight or drive. And even then there's usually the requirement to listen in the near field for the best results.

The 707 S2 doesn't sound cold and analytical at modest volume levels, but delivers fullness, detail and dynamic expression that swells in a natural and organic way when you wind things up. Its talent for cohesion and creating the space for music to breathe and resolve is brilliantly illustrated with Alison Moyet's live version of *I Germinate*, which has rolling bass, a vast stadium acoustic and a delicious sense of Moyet's simmering, controlled power.

It helps that the midband combines fine focus with a feeling of presence that's almost tactile. Maybe best of all, the carbon tweeter seems to give the sound almost spookily believable texture and harmonic richness that only adds to this speaker's addictive sense of verve, scale and musicality.

Conclusion

I'm reminded of the slogan for the first *Superman* film with Christopher Reeve – "You'll believe a man can fly". Bolted to its dedicated stands (the £400 FS-700 S2) and driven by a suitably capable amp, the 707 S2 seems to achieve the impossible, combining room-filling scale, proper bass and energetic rhythmic drive with remarkable dynamic freedom, natural tonality and musical insight. It might not be the fastest or most forensically detailed small speaker on the market, but I haven't heard another that marries the advantages of being small with sonic benefits previously exclusive to beefy floorstanders. It's freaky, but in a good way. A terrific standmount and outstanding value for money. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Beautiful design; build; engaging full-scale sound

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Dedicated stands and a decent amp recommended, but then prepare to be amazed



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Oxford Audio Consultants Oxford	01865 790879	Harrow Audio Harrow	020 8930 9933
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Doug Brady Hi-Fi Warrington	01925 828009	Holburn Hifi Aberdeen	01224 585713
Vickers Hifi York	01904 691600	Hifonix Sutton Coldfield	0121 382 5444

DALI Spektor 2

IT MIGHT BE just one step up from DALI's entry-level range, but the Danish brand's materials and methodology run through the Spektor 2 like the lettering in a stick of rock. Take the 130mm mid/bass driver. Its cone uses a mix of low-mass paper with wood fibre reinforcement. The idea is that the fibres give the diaphragm's surface an uneven structure, claimed to minimise resonance and improve resolution. The 25mm tweeter is also a recipient of trickle-down tech, featuring an ultra-lightweight weaved fabric soft dome that DALI claims weighs half as much as the market norm.

Sound quality

Playing jazz bass legend Stanley Clarke's dazzlingly potent mini-concept track, *Combat Continuum*, the Spektor 2's exuberant sense of

life and pace is immediately apparent. It isn't just that it has more treble energy than most, but there's also greater clarity and intensity. It bests most for bass power and extension, too. It might become a bit too aggressive and in your face at party levels, but most of the time it simply sounds open, detailed and dynamic.

This is something of a double-edged sword with the simple piano, voice and strings of Diana Krall's *Desperado*, drilling deeper into the recording so that her enunciation becomes still clearer, the grand piano's sustain is richer and more reverberant and the massed violins sound more like individual instruments possessing greater harmonic structure. But the warmth and silkiness that the song depends on to really hook you in is just a little lacking.

What the Spektor 2 makes of Boz Scaggs' blues number *The Feeling Is*



Gone from album *Out Of The Blues*, however, is quite remarkable. The great man has seldom sounded more adenoidal or soulful and the song simply thunders out with huge energy and drive, sounding improbably massive given the size of the speaker. The Spektor 2's ability to track a rhythm and keep its finger on the pulse of the music is right on the money. For sheer brio and musical involvement it's certainly going to be hard to beat. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
DALI Spektor 2
PRICE
£199
TELEPHONE
0845 6443537
WEBSITE
dali-speakers.com/
uk
REVIEWED
HFC 441

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Fyne Audio F301

BASICALLY OLD-GUARD

TANNOY talent marching under its own flag, Fyne Audio has wasted no time pinning itself to the UK's hi-fi map with two, well-stocked model lines and a roll-out schedule that would make even a well-oiled multinational sweat.

The F301 boasts a whopping great 150mm mid/bass driver with a multi-fibre paper cone and a phase plug at the centre to smooth roll-off characteristics. Look more closely and you'll notice that the roll rubber surround is contoured and looks a little like the outer tread of a car tyre. Fyne Audio calls this variable geometry FyneFlute technology and says the aim is to provide a non-homogeneous interface and thus a more effective barrier for the cone's energy – leading to a cleaner sound. Meanwhile, the tweeter's protective mesh cover incorporates a

'phase loss compensator' that delays output for a smoother and more extended frequency response.

Sound quality

The F301's bigger box makes it sound more relaxed than the DALI (above) and at the top end there's a little more light and sparkle. Bass is firm and well judged, and it is significantly more sensitive than most. The instrumental strands running through Donald Fagen's *The Night Belongs To Mona* might be many, delicate, complex and convoluted, but here everything is clear and in the right place at the right time. The speaker has a deft touch with vast soundscapes, too. And yet nothing is in the least diffuse. Performers, instruments and special effects can be located with pinpoint accuracy and tonally they ring just as true. The ability to present fine detail in a musically coherent yet



uninhibited manner is the mark of a fine speaker at any price and the F301 has it in spades. Its portrayal of Diana Krall's piano in *Desperado* is a singular joy, delivering the attack of hammer on string and a woody richness that price rivals can't quite capture. Perhaps best of all, this speaker lets the music breathe and sound natural without hype or artifice and that contributes greatly to its listenability. It isn't brightly lit, there's no spray-on sheen or strategic emphasis. No manipulative euphony. It's just the music, pure and simple. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Fyne Audio F301
PRICE
£250
TELEPHONE
0141 4284008
WEBSITE
fyneaudio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 441

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★



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STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



Dynaudio Special Forty

In 2017, Danish loudspeaker brand Dynaudio hit the big four-O, hence the name.

The resulting loudspeaker saw the company's famed 28mm Esotar²-coated soft-dome tweeter undergoing some refinement. The even more powerful Neodymium magnet assembly now has a new pressure conduit – a specially shaped vent that allows a more spacious rear chamber and controls how the air moves from the back of the diaphragm into that space.

The tweeter's frequency response has been tweaked to reach down to around 1kHz – well into the midrange – for still smoother integration with what Dynaudio describes as its “best-ever 170mm woofer”. Its basis is the long-running 17W75 driver, which uses the company's MSP (Magnesium Silicate Polymer) cone material, but debuts an improved ‘Nomex’ spider and ‘optimised excursion-symmetry’. This mid/bass unit is a one-piece design, the large centre dome being part of the playing surface with a claimed frequency response extending to 4kHz. Dynaudio says that the 3kHz overlap between tweeter and mid/bass driver removes the need for steep filters and complex

circuitry in the crossover to make the units' contributions mesh together seamlessly. As such, the requirement is for fine tuning rather than major manipulation and a relatively simple first-order crossover does the job.

Sound quality

Sometimes, when listening to a hi-fi system, it's the hardware's ability to deconstruct and analyse that can impose itself on what you're hearing. It isn't always a negative. Sure, it should all be about the music pure and simple, but often I catch myself listening to the electro-mechanical means of its reproduction: the grip an amp is exerting over speakers; the leading edge attack of a rim shot; the width, depth and height of the soundstage rather than what's going on within it.

The sound can be simultaneously impressive and distracting, capable of fixating listeners with a specialised, asymmetric skillset that ultimately prescribes what works and the kind of music they therefore buy.

The Special Forty is the rare product that somehow manages to reconcile all the important hi-fi performance metrics – transparency and tenacity have no quarrel – yet doesn't hype or

hinder the music, however broad the church. It's a quality that's hard to describe, but unmistakable when you hear it – a serene sense of flow, perspective, order and dynamic freedom. Deep coherence. Richly textured tonality. Openness and air. A warm balance, yes. But listen to the achingly plaintive massed strings and horns of *Brothers* on Randy Newman's *Dark Matter* album and you wouldn't have it any other way.

This overarching sense of naturalness is realised not so much as neutrality and smoothness as stunning midband resolution and aerobic capacity.

Michael McDonald's *Honest Emotion* bristles and breathes in open space. It's the subtle realism that convinces – the earthiness and emotion in his voice delivered without edge or hardness. Unerring listenability is born of fascinating detail, a dynamic compass that chimes true, great bass and a tonal palette barely distinguishable from reality.

My regular standmount references – ATC's SCM11 and Russell K's Red 50 (HFC 422) – are more than a grand less than the Dynaudio and could teach it a thing or two in specific areas. The ATC is more neutral and has a tauter bass. The Russell K is faster and more rhythmically explicit. But neither eclipses the Special Forty for sheer, listen-into-the-late-hours musicality. A classic in the making? No, it's there already.

Conclusion

Whatever its accountants might say, Dynaudio has done itself no harm in giving the Special Forty the full weight of its expertise and experience to play off against a cheekily understated appearance. Occasionally – what better time could there be than your birthday – it's all right to show off. And the result, in this case, is simply joyous. This is an exceptional standmount by any standard and, at £2,500, a conspicuous bargain. **DV**

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Dynaudio
Special Forty

PRICE
£2,500

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
198 x 360 x 307mm

FEATURES
● 28mm
soft-dome tweeter
● 170mm
mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Dynaudio UK

TELEPHONE
01638 742427

WEBSITE
dynaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 434

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Thrilling musicality and transparency; build and finish

DISLIKE: Red birch gloss finish may divide opinion

WE SAY: A true high-end standmount for real-world money



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Entirely designed, engineered and built in Britain, Mojo contains the most advanced DAC technology in the world, putting its performance far beyond the reach of rivals, permanently. Our very own super-mini, Mojo delivers the undisputed musicality of Chord Electronics' class-leading DACs to an unbeatable pocket-size device. Mobile music has never sounded this good.

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Chord Electronics Ltd.

Mission QX-2

TUBBY ISN'T A word usually associated with the form factor of a standmount, but in the case of the QX-2 I can't think of a better one. It starts with the stand-out difference of looking as if it's upside down, the tweeter sitting beneath the mid/bass driver. The rationale is that by positioning the treble unit below the mid/bass driver, the length of path is equalised so that the sound waves coincide at the listener's head height, optimising time alignment.

More than just a pretty upside-down face, it employs Mission's new DiaDrive cone system, which has an inverted cone driven by a secondary sub cone to "transfer maximum transient impact" from the motor system, which uses an oversized magnet to improve sensitivity. The 38mm ring-dome tweeter is a new design, and is claimed to offer high detail resolution and low levels

of distortion. The heavily flared rear-firing bass reflex port is shaped like an athletics running track and, as most ports are, designed for low drag and minimum unwanted 'chuffing'.

Sound quality

Within the first few bars of The Beach Boys' *Disney Girls*, the QX-2 sounds more seductive than anything that's priced even remotely close to it; invitingly smooth and warm yet, at the same time, clear and incisive. It has a lighter touch than most, but with greater dynamic reach and capacity to move air. Thirty Seconds To Mars' *Walk On Water* seems more completely realised in a more clearly defined space – tonally, temporally, temperamentally. The low-frequency energy is suddenly fleshier and a whole lot more foundational.

It's all a bit moreish bordering on addictive. Here's a speaker that



sounds extremely comfortable and confident in its own skin, making it a joy to spend time with. It's in synch with itself, settled in equilibrium. It combines sweetness with authority and an approximation of slam that's remarkable for a standmount. Listening to the tightly intertwined intricacies of Eels' *The Deconstruction*, the QX-2 is responsive right down to the last vestigial microdynamic nuance. It's honest to the recording, transparent to the power and emotion of the music and captures its inner beauty like nothing else. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mission QX-2

PRICE
£399

TELEPHONE
01279 459170

WEBSITE
mission.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 436

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Q Acoustics 3020i

AS THE LARGER of the two standmount offerings in the 3000i series lineup, the 3020i promises to be nothing less than formidable.

The 125mm mid/bass driver uses a cone that's precision formed from impregnated and coated paper and mated with a newly developed, low-hysteresis, rubber surround – claimed to accelerate without flexing and stop very accurately without unwanted resonances. The 22mm micro-fibre soft dome tweeter is decoupled from the baffle to isolate it from vibrations from the mid/bass driver and has a wide surround for increased dispersion. The neatly integrated binding posts and chrome driver trims look up market, too.

Sound quality

Compared with many rivals at the price, the 3020i is a real exhale... and relax moment. It's a 'Chill

buddy, I've got this' speaker and whatever the music style or genre it's hosting it's an absolute delight from start to finish. With Donald Fagen's *The Night Belongs To Mona* its impressively smooth, extended treble has fine inner detail and integrates seamlessly with a midband that is poised, open and articulate, which in turn, melds with the weighty, tuneful bass. The Fagen cut is a good test here, its lower synth-generated octaves recorded with a tad too much prominence in the mix, which can easily sound bloated and ploddy on less-disciplined speakers. But the 3020i walks the line perfectly, its bass sounding full and firm with no sign of dissolving into turgidity.

But it's the musicality and coherence that stuns – the sheer scale and generosity of the sound and its unerring ability to lay bare the spirit and emotional power of the music.



The Stanley Clarke Band's sci-fi-infused *Combat Continuum* might hit new heights of fiery, grandiose absurdity, but it's the gentle beauty of Diana Krall's *Desperado* that shows the speaker's true class. The deep warmth and husky veneer of her vocal is exquisitely portrayed, the accompanying piano and massed strings possess a shimmering, scalp tingling presence. Strength and subtlety, the 3020i delivers both with apparent ease. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics 3020i

PRICE
£249

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 441

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



Raidho XT-1

Going small without compromising on sound is the kind of neat trick that this smooth operator manages to pull with ease

Sometimes a specific set of circumstances come together to produce a really special product – one that is unexpectedly strong. For example, in the case of the first NAD 3020 integrated amplifier the company took the bigger, fatter 3030, threw away all the superfluous bits and instead put a great circuit into a small box. The result far exceeded everyone's expectations. The Raidho XT-1 is one such example. The company makes excellent high-end

speakers, but has never done anything this small yet this good. It uses existing Raidho technology, but opts to repackage it into a wonderfully capable yet compact standmount.

Owned by Dantax Radio, Raidho is a sister company of Scansonic and Harmony. Some audiophiles may have heard of at least one of the men behind it; Lars Venning is the chief executive, Lars Kristensen (known to many for his work with Nordost) is the main marketing man and Michael Børresen was until recently chief

designer. It is he who has conferred an exceedingly pleasant family sound on Raidho loudspeakers, and this one is no exception.

This is the improved version of the company's entry level X-1 mini-monitor with a newly upgraded mid/bass driver. It will set you back £6,500 in factory black finish, or £6,800 in white; both look beautiful. You can buy a matching pair of stands for £499. The company's distinctive aesthetic signature is partly down to the use of a ribbon tweeter. This is Raidho's sealed design, and according to Børresen the foundation of the brand's sound. He told *HFC* it is: "The best driver we have", not least because the membrane is said to be 50 times lighter than a conventional dome design, and yet has a much larger surface area. Added to this is a very powerful neodymium magnet, which in effect is a versatile high-frequency driver that works all the way down to 3.5kHz.

The beating heart is the newly upgraded 100mm Ceramix titanium mid/bass unit. This has a compact

Due to its dinky dimensions it doesn't impose itself on the room

and magnetically rigid neodymium magnet motor system, driving a multi-layered ceramic/aluminium/titanium hybrid cone; the XT variant tested here differs from the cheaper Raidho X-1 because it adds a layer of titanium and titanium nitride to the ceramic driver membrane. This makes for a seven-layer cone said to be very stiff, yet with excellent intrinsic damping properties.

The cabinet has been designed to minimise resonance. It starts off life with a huge advantage because there are no big, vibration-prone side panels. Yet this small speaker is still constructed to be exceedingly solid and weighs a good deal more than you'd expect for the size. As per all Raidho speakers, the front baffle is an exquisite aluminium casting and has a specially shaped slot port at the bottom. Rap your knuckle on the side and you're greeted with a dull 'thunk' that decays quickly down to nothing.

The company claims a frequency range of 80Hz to 50kHz (-3dB); while I cannot vouch for the upper part of that, the lower seems realistic. The XT-1 is obviously compromised in its bass response by its size, yet those buying an ultra compact

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Raidho XT-1

PRICE
From £6,500

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
145 x 320 x 230mm

FEATURES
• 1x sealed
ribbon tweeter
• 1x 100mm
titanium mid/
bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
85dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Decent Audio

TELEPHONE
05602 054669

WEBSITE
decentaudio.co.uk;
raidho.dk

REVIEWED
HFC 433

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER

standmounter such as this are not likely to worry – it is designed for smaller rooms where a deep extended bass will be more of a hindrance than a help. The other downside is the quoted sensitivity of 85dB/1W/1m; that's about as good as you're going to get from such a small loudspeaker – as any user of a BBC LS3/5a knows, you don't really buy miniature monitors for their ability to go loud with low-powered amplifiers.

Raidho claims that you'll need at least 50W RMS per channel to drive the XT-1 properly, but does not quote a maximum power handling figure – in a small listening environment perhaps that is somewhat academic. Nominal impedance, meanwhile, is said to be a fairly easy 6ohm.

Sound quality

I've been a fan of Raidho speakers for a good long time – and find its top-of-the-range designs hugely impressive. So it doesn't come as a complete surprise to find myself rather beguiled by the XT-1. Indeed it has many of the benefits of the far more expensive flagship models – such as that gorgeous tweeter – at a much lower price. What you do lose, though, is bass; obviously this is a seriously small speaker and you never forget this. The upside is that unlike most designs of similar dimensions, the XT-1 copes with being small really rather well. You're going to get an obvious lack of bass extension, but driven hard most small speakers compress badly and really seem like they're struggling. With the XT-1, I am surprised just how well it holds up with large amounts of input power; it's a robust little thing.

In a nutshell, it is smooth and sophisticated, yet enjoyable punchy and propulsive. One of my few criticisms of large Raidho C-series speakers is that the bass isn't quite as fast or tight as that exquisite treble. Yet here, that's not so much the case; this has a wonderfully integrated sound that blends seamlessly in with both the music being played, and the listening room. Due to its dinky dimensions it doesn't impose itself on the room, preferring instead to melt into it; this done, it's able to throw out a large and engulfing soundstage. From upper bass to high treble, everything sounds subtle and finely etched and there's no shoutiness in any part of the frequency spectrum.

Take Crosby, Stills and Nash's *Wooden Ships*, for example. Although a seminal song it's not a brilliant recording, yet the Raidho digs deep into the mix and throws out loads

of detail. That superb tweeter is such a help here; it serves up lovely filigree detail that almost lets you taste the buttery vocal harmonies and lustrous guitar work. At the same time the bass guitar bobs up and down in a supple and fluid way, and the overall effect is quite transfixing. You can almost feel the California sunshine and smell the smoke in the air from this recording.

Texturally the XT-1 is truly superb, really giving a sense of the moment that the music was made, and the instruments that were used. Although tonally ever so slightly on the warm side, this speaker isn't coloured in the usual sense; it is open and neutral enough to give you a real feel of what's in the recording.

It's always interesting to see how speakers handle relatively lo-fi recordings – generally those that do well excel with the hi-fi ones. To this end, on goes Alex de Grassi's *The Water Garden*. An exemplary piece of modern classical guitar work, the XT-1 savours every last four-bar phrase. Again, the listener is drawn to the tonal purity of the lead instrument; its every harmonic touch rings out around the listening room (it's a great advertisement for DSD), and I'm also impressed by the timing. Thanks to that light ribbon treble unit, the Raidho has great transient speed and is highly dextrous at conveying the attack of such a commandingly played guitar. The way that the instrument's sound bounces off the studio walls is well conveyed too, showing the speaker's fine ability with low-level detail so that reverb doesn't fall off a cliff.

Moving to some classic techno in the shape of Kraftwerk's immaculately recorded *Techno Pop*, and this little loudspeaker is in its element for all the aforementioned reasons. It also showcases the Raidho's fine stereo imaging. It's far more expansive than you would expect from something of this size, and locates strands in the mix with pin-point precision. The sampled electronic percussion sounds almost bolted down in the room, and the central vocals float out of the mix with complete autonomy. Also really satisfying is the stage depth, which delivers the track in a

truly three-dimensional way, unveiling layer after layer of sound. At the same time, the Raidho never once appears analytical or 'workmanlike' – its speed and insight make for deft handling of the song's infectious rhythms. The opening *Allegro* of Beethoven's *String Quartet No.4 in C minor* played by The Allegri String Quartet shows precisely the same.

There is absolutely nothing to criticise this loudspeaker over, then – except its bass. There's an obvious lack of extension down below, which means you only get the leading bass notes of many pop songs; it reaches down lower than you'd imagine

It is smooth and sophisticated, yet enjoyable punchy and propulsive

considering its size, but there's definitely a sense that an octave or so is missing. In the best traditions of superb small speakers, this has far less of a deleterious effect that never fails to engage the listener. The low bass on the nineties trance song *Burly House* by Uncle Bob is lacking, but the tune is all still there with a vengeance.

Conclusion

Raidho's XT-1 costs £6,500. That sort of money won't buy you much loudspeaker, but it certainly gets you a serious amount of sound. Spacious, expressive, lucid, fluid, open and musical – there is so much to like. The usual caveat with a speaker of this size has to be given regarding its bass performance, but buyers of small standmounters tend to have already made the decision to forfeit an octave or so of low frequencies for better sound further up the frequency scale. Anyone looking to get their hands on one of the best baby speakers around really needs to hear this one. **DP**

A matching pair of stands will set you back £499



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Transparency; integration; imaging; delicious treble

DISLIKE: Limited bass; needs a powerful partnering amplifier

WE SAY: Exquisite miniature monitor for compact spaces

6000 Series

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(6000A) What Hi-Fi? Sept 18



Hi-Fi Choice



"This brilliant integrated does it all"

(6000A) – Hi-Fi Choice, Jan 19



STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER

Although not quite caramel coated, the sound has a subtle warmish sepia tint to it, yet the liveness of the midband and treble make for real fireworks. The bottom end is very good too; snappier than I expect, allowing Sting's bass guitar to propel the song along. In strict terms, there's a little looseness to the bass, although it's only subtle. There are no nasties like a booming cabinet or chuffing port, yet it can't quite deliver the tightness and 'thwack' of more expensive designs. Importantly, though, the bass is always tuneful and bouncy – and that's what matters.

Tryouts For The Human Race by Sparks shows its surprisingly capacious character, setting up a wide recorded acoustic with lots of space inside for the listener to peer around. Its midband is most impressive, showing the different layers of sounds in a clean and insightful way, while keeping everything tightly defined in space inside the mix.

Feed it modern electronica and it becomes clear that this is a very detailed loudspeaker indeed. Manix's *Any Kinda Music* has a fruity piano lead with a sampled string glide in the background, under which a super deep bassline does its stuff, as looped hi-hats and rim shots fly around. The Sonetto II is able to pick through all this like a hot knife through melting parmesan, letting you hear all the constituent parts of the mix without sounding like it's deconstructing it.

Conclusion

The Sonetto II has an endearing character that makes music fun, whatever you choose to listen to – but it doesn't sacrifice basic accuracy in doing so. It has fine tonality, great rhythmic bounce, decent dynamics for a smallish standmount and commendable soundstaging with impressive depth perspective. Factor in its obvious style and quality, and it's hard not to love. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Snappy rhythm; sweet tonality; soundstaging

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Charming, stylish standmount with fine sound

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Sonus faber Sonetto II

Described by Sonus faber as “affordable high-end”, the Sonetto II is more the former than the latter by the standards of the marque, sitting between the Venere and Olympica collections. This compact standmount sports a new 29mm dome tweeter and 165mm mid/bass driver. The former's diaphragm is made from a soft silk dome produced by DKM Germany, hand coated and enhanced with the company's Damped Apex Dome technology. The latter is a proprietary natural fibre cone with air-dried cellulose, previously only seen on Olympica, Homage and Reference collections. The two units crossover at 2.65kHz and claimed frequency response is 42Hz to 25kHz. The 15-litre, 22mm-thick high-density fibreboard cabinet has an integral front baffle with no seams between the curved sides. Gunmetal finished

aluminium frames add visual drama, and there's a front-firing reflex port.

Sound quality

Being a standmount design it obviously has limited bass, yet it has been voiced to sound fairly full down below too and has a decent amount of body. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, things are smooth and ever so slightly sweet. This makes for a very companionable listen – it's not as much a speaker you respect as one you like or even love.

Alongside the butter-smooth tone, the Sonetto II's general get up and go is its most impressive facet. The Police's *Wrapped Around Your Finger* features brilliantly syncopated drums with the guitar and bass, it's lightning fast and razor sharp – especially the snare and hi-hat. It doesn't get the last bit of dynamic accenting, but still times more tightly than I'd imagine.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonus faber
Sonetto II

PRICE
£1,898

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
250 x 370 x 334mm

FEATURES
• 1x 29mm
high-definition
DAD tweeter
• 1x 165mm natural
fibre mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
87dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0208 9713909

WEBSITE
absolutesounds.com

REVIEWED
HFC 443



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GOLD NOTE
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ON DEMO

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- Includes dust cover



£7,065

24 Months Warranty

SME AUDIO

ON DEMO

SME Turntable Model 10 Ltd Black Edition

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£6,195

24 Months Warranty

SME AUDIO

ON DEMO

Transmission Line Stand-Mount Kerr Acoustic K300

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- 2" true ribbon tweeter
- Frequency response: 33Hz – 45kHz
- Satin or gloss finish
- Available in any colour at no extra cost



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36 Months Warranty

KerrAcoustic

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Transmission Line Floor-standing Kerr Acoustic K320

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- 2" true ribbon tweeter
- Frequency response: 24Hz – 45kHz
- Satin or gloss finish
- Available in any colour at no extra cost



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36 Months Warranty

KerrAcoustic

AVAILABLE TO ORDER

Transmission Line Loudspeaker Kerr Acoustic K100

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ON DEMO

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£399

24 Months Warranty

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ON DEMO

Audio-Technica Cartridges AT-ART9

- Moving coil



£899

24 Months Warranty

audio-technica

ON DEMO

Belt Drive Turntable McIntosh MT2

- Inc. moving coil cartridge
- Includes dust cover
- Backlit McIntosh logo

£4,995

36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

Belt Drive Turntable McIntosh MT5

- Inc. moving coil cartridge
- Includes dust cover
- MT10 flagship available

£8,999

36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

Stereo Integrated Amplifier McIntosh MA252

- 160 watts per channel
- Hybrid design: vacuum tube preamp and solid state power amp

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36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

Stereo Vacuum Tube Amplifier McIntosh MC275 MK VI

- 75 watts per channel @ 2, 4 or 8 Ω
- Vacuum tube design
- Legendary design now in Mark VI form

£7,100

36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

Stereo Integrated Amplifier McIntosh MA9000

- 300 watts per channel
- 8-band tone control
- DA1 digital audio module
- MA7200 also available

£12,995

36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

Monoblock Solid State Amplifier McIntosh MC611

- 600 watt quad balanced
- Monogrammed heatsink
- 2, 4 and 8 Ω outputs

£19,995 /pair

36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

Stereo Vacuum Tube Preamplifier McIntosh C1100

- Separate audio & control sections
- 12 analog inputs including MM & MC
- Full digital inputs, massive specification

£15,590 /pair

36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

2-Channel Solid State Amplifier McIntosh MC462

- 450 watts per channel
- Quad balanced design with McIntosh Autoformers™

£12,495

36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

2-Channel Solid State Amplifier McIntosh MC312

- 300 watts x 2 channels
- 27% increase in dynamic headroom compared to previous model
- McIntosh Autoformers™

£9,995

36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

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36 Months
Warranty



McIntosh

ON DEMO

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24 Months
Warranty



GOLD NOTE

ON DEMO

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Warranty

£809



GOLD NOTE

ON DEMO

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£4,499

24 Months
Warranty



GOLD NOTE

ON DEMO

Belt Drive Turntable Giglio

- 33mm Sustain® platter
- Quadral-core power supply
- Dust cover included

£3,495

24 Months
Warranty



GOLD NOTE

ON DEMO

Belt Drive Turntable Valore 425 Plus

- 9" tonearm derived from B-5.1 model
- Available in acrylic, black, white, walnut or black leather

£1,359

24 Months
Warranty



GOLD NOTE

ON DEMO

Loudspeakers XS-85

- 5 driver design
- Available in gloss black, gloss white or italian walnut

£34,720 /pair

24 Months
Warranty



GOLD NOTE

ON DEMO

Gold Note Cartridges Vasari (Gold)

- Moving magnet

£319

24 Months
Warranty



GOLD NOTE

ON DEMO

Gold Note Cartridges Donatello (Gold)

- Moving coil

£865

24 Months
Warranty



GOLD NOTE

AVAILABLE TO ORDER

Gold Note Cartridges Tuscany (Gold)

- Moving coil

£6,635

24 Months
Warranty



GOLD NOTE

AVAILABLE TO ORDER

CTIVE SPEAKER SYSTEM



KEF

LS50 Wireless

The stylish standard-setter's transformation into a wireless active speaker system is complete, but does it deliver the goods?

Sooner or later, thinking gets connected and everyone's happy. KEF's LS50 Wireless is a neat (and I do mean neat) example. Prior to its launch, there tended to be just two types of self-powered stereo speakers you could buy in the UK. One is the truly active type favoured by recording studios, with dedicated built-in power amplification for each driver that requires a couple of mains sockets and a link to an external preamp and source to work. Maybe not the ultimate clutter-buster and no digital processing, but what a sound. The other, hitching its colours to the nascent lifestyle trend, simply puts an integrated amp/DAC with Bluetooth inside one of the enclosures, giving drive to its passive host speaker and,

via a length of speaker cable, its equally conventional partner. This approach is undeniably convenient and, depending on the internal amp/DAC combo, capable of respectable sonic results. But it's not active in the truest, purest sense. One such speaker from HFC's recent reviewing past that struck a likeable compromise is DALI's Zensor 5 AX (HFC 410) while Acoustic Energy's AE1 Active (HFC 421) is a fine representative for the frill-free, super-sonics active camp.

KEF's LS50 Wireless isn't the first two-box package to seek a perfect marriage between true active design and wireless convenience, but being network as well as 4.0 aptX Bluetooth-enabled and including streaming with Spotify, Tidal *et al* does cut down the field somewhat.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
KEF LS50 Wireless

PRICE
£2,000

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Active loudspeaker system with wireless streaming

WEIGHT
10 & 10.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 300 x 308mm

FEATURES
• Uni-Q driver array: 25mm aluminium tweeter with 130mm magnesium/aluminium mid/bass
• Inputs: 1x USB Type-B; 1x optical; 1x RCA
• Quoted power output: 2x 200W Class D; 2x 30W Class AB

DISTRIBUTOR
GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01622 672261

WEBSITE
uk.kef.com

REVIEWED
HFC 433

Considering the £2k asking price, the wealth of connectivity, the acclaimed LS50 aesthetic and sound (latter 'actively' pushed to the max, here), it would be understandable if you were left wondering where the catch is. Or, indeed, the competition.

The deeper you delve, the harder it is to fathom just how much has been folded into the deal at the price. Yet in a sense, the LS50 Wireless project was always a win-win, no brainer for KEF's engineers. In the passive £800 LS50 (HFC 384), the Kent-based company already had an iconic speaker design – appreciated both for its strikingly sparse, bowed-baffle look, single full-range Uni-Q driver array and big, expansive sound. Done properly, active always trumps passive (ask any speaker designer) and KEF felt it was an unmissable opportunity to exploit the full potential of an already very capable standmount.

As such, each part of the Uni-Q driver has its own dedicated amp and each channel its own DAC. The heavy lifting is accomplished by a compact, efficient, cool-running 200W Class D module driving the magnesium/aluminium 130mm mid/bass element of the Uni-Q array while a 30W Class A/B unit takes care of the 25mm aluminium dome tweeter, the system operating in a bi-amp, dual mono configuration. With a signal path

that's digital end-to-end, most inputs are upsampled to 24-bit/192kHz – the analogue line-in via an ADC – but, not unusually, the optical input is limited to 96kHz.

Digital Signal Processing (DSP) serves a variety of functions, gifting the Wireless yet more qualities that wouldn't be possible with a passive design. Being able to tailor the sound for the speakers' placement in the room with selectable EQ is perhaps the most obvious and useful, especially when this level of flexibility can be so easily executed from the well-designed iOS/Android app. But DSP is also used to phase correct the crossover and time align the driver elements for crisper timing and focus while specially written software aims to minimise the kind of balance aberrations and distortion artefacts that are hard to avoid with passive speakers, particularly when swapping between late-night listening and party levels. Add the Uni-Q driver's reputation for delivering excellent off-axis dispersion along with a real sense of soundstage depth and pinpoint imaging, and you can't blame KEF for claiming that the LS50 Wireless is a unique proposition.

Fine clarity and focus, a spacious soundstage and unfettered musicality

At first glance, it looks like the regular LS50, which is hardly surprising as the low-resonance FEA-designed cabinet, Uni-Q driver, constrained layer damping bracing, precision-engineered curved baffle and elliptical flexible rear-firing reflex port are just the same. Side on, it's more obvious that the cabinets are a little deeper and heat-sinked to accommodate and dissipate the heat that's generated by the on-board electronics. Substantially weightier, too. The right-hand 'master' speaker is the one with the controls and connections. A touch-sensitive strip for power-up/down, input selection and volume runs along the top surface, functions shared and added to by the small, pebble-smooth remote and free phone/tablet app. Round the back there's a line-level stereo analogue input, a Toslink optical socket, an asynchronous Type B USB and two Ethernet ports – one for making a wired connection to your network if you don't fancy the 2.4GHz/5GHz twin-band wireless option, the other for syncing the

two speakers via the generous run of supplied Cat 6 shielded cable. There's even provision to hook up a subwoofer.

Sound quality

Since KEF claims the LS50 Wireless is audiophile-grade hi-fi for people who aren't audiophiles or into hi-fi, the system is set up on a large and sturdy coffee table from the sixties in my bedroom. As the resident music act in this room is Geneva's estimable Aérospéré Large (*HFC* 407) and, recently guesting, T+A's terrific one-box Cala streaming receiver (*HFC* 431) driving a pair of Wharfedale Diamond 11.1s (*HFC* 429), the sonic stakes are pretty high.

With its glossy white cabinet and copper-hued Uni-Q (titanium grey/red and gloss black/blue combo finishes are also available), the LS50 Wireless looks far more at home book-ending a stylish table than perched on my speaker stands. EQ set accordingly, network successfully established wirelessly and with a Yamaha CD-N301 (*HFC 401*), optically tethered for CD playing duties, we're ready to roll.

Your first thoughts are probably as quizzical as mine. Does the Wireless sound as good, or possibly even better, than a passive LS50 and a class front end packing oodles of effortless power from an expensive amplifier? In the ways that matter most for coherence, focus, rhythmic precision, properly proportioned dynamics and overall intelligibility, it's a resounding yes on all counts. It might be an inconvenient truth for a domestic audio market steeped in separates, but active speakers are simply better at these things. And they go loud in real terms without sounding so, well, loud. If what you're thinking is you could live with this sound, I'm happy to confirm so could I.

Fairly wide as my coffee table is, it's hardly an optimum setting and although I can put some distance between myself and the speakers, there's nowhere for me to sit dead centre to experience a notional sweet spot. But it doesn't seem to matter. Wherever I sit there's a good sense of soundstage air and structure as well as remarkable scale and authority. Hans Zimmer's post-Vangelis soundtrack for *Blade Runner 2049* is massive, captured in all its industrial fog and rumbling menace without the squashed or smeared perspectives and tonal unevenness that usually go with an offset listening position.

Room filling, yes, but the combination of actively driven Uni-Q and DSP really does seem to mitigate the



speaker/room compromises we often reluctantly accept and try to shrug off. Which isn't to say the LS50 Wireless shies away from critical listening. In fact, the real beauty of the system is that it never seems to be off duty in this respect. Spinning LCD Soundsystem's *Call The Police* from its *American Dream* CD, detail and dynamics shine through whether played quietly or close to the LS50 Wireless' impressively lofty SPL ceiling.

Conclusion

Best of all, though, is the sense that every fibre and sinew of this system is pulling in the same direction. Fine clarity and focus, a spacious soundstage with stunning image solidity and unfettered musicality make for immersive and hugely enjoyable listening. Add the good looks, positioning flexibility and fulsome feature count, and the LS50 Wireless' appeal is clear. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



.....

VALUE FOR MONEY



.....
BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



SPEAKER SYSTEM



Eclipse

TD510ZMK2/ TD520SW

When a 2.1 speaker sounds this good, you can't help but wonder why more people don't include a sub in their setup

Over the years, technical possibilities have raced ahead, allowing the reproduction of a wider range of frequencies with ever greater accuracy, but rather neglecting 'the sound and spirit of the performance' in a classic can't-see-the-wood-for-the-trees scenario. To correct this, Eclipse contends, you must be able to recreate an impulse signal as accurately as possible. Get this right and music sounds more like music, freed from time smear and other corrupting artefacts. Multiple moving-coil driver configurations are on the back foot when it comes to

This speaker system renders the walls of the room massless and transparent

achieving this ideal, but a single driver is in with a shout. With no need for a crossover, integration and phase coherence issues are history.

Of course, this is nothing new and, if anything, Eclipse is late in seeking to exploit a single driver's inherent advantages. Its methods, however, clearly set it apart. The jewel in the crown, the 40 times iterated-to-optimum 100mm, glass-fibre coned full-range driver, isn't fixed to the front of the rear-ported ABS enclosure but 'floated' by a heavy, conical internal anchor, which also ushers mechanical vibration directly into the full-length, sand-filled aluminium stand and base. This minimises vibration transferred to an enclosure that is impervious to the cabinet flex and colouration that afflicts speakers constructed from slabs of MDF.

The TD520SW subwoofer employs two 200mm bass drivers firing from

the flanks of the sealed cabinet, which is braced by a shaft bridging its motor systems, allowing the units to 'float' instead of being attached to the woodwork where they'd propagate vibration and excite colourations. The drivers are powered by an ICEpower digital amp rated at 250W.

Sound quality

Surprisingly, the 'bass' setting can work a little magic with some recordings and not just thin and weedy ones. It certainly gives Luca Alemanno's fast-moving acoustic double bass more of the right stuff and hitherto unsuspected ambient 'presence' on Dave Koz & Friends' *Route 66*. As a rule, leaving it switched off lets you experience surely one of the fastest, driest, most un-subwoofery and musically adept low-frequency generators ever made – as, indeed, it must be when teamed with the TD510ZMK2.

Ideally, the rest of the system should be reading from the same page. Rated at an insensitive 84dB, the extremely un-square Eclipse prefers a muscular, grippy solid-state amp. So, the best muscular, grippy, solid-state amplification I know for the money – ATC's CA2/P1 pre-power combo (*HFC* 397) – is joined by Cambridge Audio's CXC CD transport (*HFC* 401), Chord Electronics' Hugo 2 DAC (*HFC* 428) and an Elipson Omega 100 Carbon Black turntable (*HFC* 407) – pace and rhythm kings all.

Back to the handling of that Dave Koz track and, balancing out that bouncy bass, Aubrey Logan's crazy, stratospheric scattering. A little lacking in the fine art of high-frequency air and filigree detail? Undoubtedly. Do I mind? To begin with, yes. I even break out my Townshend Audio super tweeters, which on their No.2 setting begin to work from about 2.5kHz, to

2.1 SPEAKER SYSTEM

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Eclipse
TD510ZMK2/
TD520SW

PRICE

£3,840/£3,000

ORIGIN

Japan

TYPE

2.1 loudspeaker
system

WEIGHT

19.5kg (speakers);
37kg (subwoofer)

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
384 x 978 x 393mm
(speakers & stands)
459 x 420 x 444mm
(subwoofer)

FEATURES

- 1x 100mm
fibreglass full-range
driver
- Quoted sensitivity
84dB 1W/1m (6ohm)
- 2x 200mm paper/
Kevlar drivers (sub)
- 250W Class D
amplifier (sub)

DISTRIBUTOR

Decent Audio

TELEPHONE

05602 054669

WEBSITE

eclipse-td.com/uk

REVIEWED

HFC 440

see if they can help. In broad terms they restore some 'air' and, pleasingly, add a little harmonic texture and edge to the plaintive massed strings on Diana Krall's *Desperado*. But, with or without the sub, they also make the Eclipse sound more familial, messing with that magical phase coherence, subverting their ability to make performers sound corporeal and decidedly three dimensional.

Here's a speaker system that renders the walls of the room massless and transparent; defines acoustic space and ambience with near absolute realism and never leaves you in doubt about the temporal veracity and rhythmic intent of pieces as slow and supple as Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now* or as fast, intricate and free flowing as Oscar Peterson's *Hymn To Freedom*. In fact, it never occurs to you, and that's the true hallmark of believability. The usual hi-fi descriptors seem somewhat inadequate here.

Conclusion

While the finest treble is beyond its technical remit and rave-aping sound pressure levels aren't going to happen, this is as good as I've ever heard and, in some respects, significantly better. An obvious candidate for the only speaker system you'll ever need, and highly recommended. **DV**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT TD510ZMK2

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Fabulously musical; build; looks

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Expensive stands; truncated bandwidth

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Single-driver tech makes this a stunningly believable combo and a winning case for the music

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT TD520SW

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Astonishingly fast and articulate; build and finish

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Large size; weight

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Simply the most musical sub we've ever heard

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

DALI Katch

THE SMALLEST OFFERING from DALI's Active Series, this is also the most affordable. For your money you get aptX-enabled Bluetooth 4.0, a 3.5mm line input and a USB charge output port so network streaming can be added using Chromecast Audio for extra functionality.

A pair of 25W amplifiers under the hood power two 21mm soft dome high-frequency drivers and a brace of 90mm low-frequency units that are further bolstered by a pair of rectangular passive radiators arranged on either side of the unit to achieve an arc of sound. A second Katch can be added to operate as a stereo pair. Two preset EQ modes provide a degree of tonal tailoring and battery life is quoted at 24 hours for 'normal' listening levels.

Our review sample comes in the new jet-black finish – which isn't really all that black – and feels

genuinely portable, thanks to the inclusion of a leather carry strap.

Sound quality

Aided by clear audio prompts, setup is painless. The violin on *Hilary Hahn Plays Bach* sounds clear and rich, ensuring the Katch gives a sense of her movement as she plays. High notes are delivered without any unwanted harshness or aggression and for a single-chassis speaker, there is an appreciable stereo image too.

GoGo Penguin's *The Raven* sounds pleasantly spacious, helped by the quality of the piano and the impressive fine detail, which ensures the plucking of the bass is clear and easy to follow. Outright bass extension is perhaps not as deep as some, but the speed and integration it offers goes a long way towards compensating for this.

Its ability to produce something akin to stereo is very helpful here and the



balance it strikes between high-frequency energy and refinement is very well struck. Peter Gabriel's vocals in *San Jacinto* are clear and have a convincing texture and presence to them that draws your attention, while the sense of get up and go with Nile Rodgers and Chic on *State Of Mine* is very impressive. The Katch is light on its feet, effortlessly funky and its ability to find little details in the midrange really help to draw you into the music. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
DALI Katch
PRICE
£329
TELEPHONE
0845 6443537
WEBSITE
dali-speakers.com
REVIEWED
HFC 443

OUR VERDICT



Sonos One

THE ONE'S COMPACT chassis means it will easily sit on a bookshelf or coffee table without taking up too much space. It squeezes in an array of six microphones, which allow it to work with interactive voice-control technologies such as Amazon Alexa and Google Home.

The Sonos app works on a wide selection of computers and mobile devices, and supports all the main streaming services, including Apple Music, Spotify and Qobuz. We understand that it plans to add Apple AirPlay 2 support early in 2019, which means you'll be able to create a mix-and-match multi-room speaker system using AirPlay 2 speakers from manufacturers other than Sonos for the first time.

Music file support is limited to a modest 16-bit/48kHz and, like other Sonos speakers, it's reliant on a home network, using either wi-fi or

Ethernet cables. There's no Bluetooth support, and not even a 3.5mm jack for wired connections.

Sound quality

It may be small, but the One produces a terrifically light, detailed sound. Brian May's solo guitar in Queen's *Bijou* chimes gently in the air, while the multiple echoes reverberate in the background, creating a far greater sense of space and atmosphere than I would expect to hear from such a compact little chassis.

The One also copes well with the more energetic guitar thrash of My Chemical Romance's *This Is How I Disappear*. The guitars have real bite and the drums land with a taut, precise slap. Yet the sound is very clear and balanced, and doesn't lose sight of more delicate details. Its size means it's not especially loud or powerful, so if you're looking for

room-filling sound you might want to look at one of Sonos' larger speaker options. Alternatively, you can link two One speakers together as a stereo pair for a more robust soundstage.

The only minor weakness – inevitably, for a speaker of this size – is in the bass performance. The One can't quite reach down to the deep and dirty electronic bass on Max Richter's *Shadow Journal*. It still manages to put on a good showing nevertheless and provides remarkably solid sound quality for such a compact multi-room model. **CJ**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonos One
PRICE
£199
TELEPHONE
0800 0261526
WEBSITE
sonos.com/en-gb
REVIEWED
HFC 433

OUR VERDICT



SEVENoaks
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Chord Electronics Qutest

As its most affordable home DAC, this pared-back design uses Chord's advanced FPGA chip and offers extensive file support

If you've been keeping up with Chord Electronics' pretty extensive range of digital-to-analogue converters you'll know that the 2Qute (HFC 402) was closely related to the Hugo (HFC 386), boasting the company's distinct Chordette casing but without the rechargeable battery and variable output. Similarly, the Qutest is the same relation to the Hugo 2 (HFC 428), inasmuch as it's a simplified, pared-down version without the portability and a few other non-essential. It also loses the

Chordette casework, looking a lot more like the Hugo 2. So, your £1,195 buys you Chord's latest and most advanced FPGA chip, four different user-selectable filters and the same wide range of file compatibility. There are also some interesting new features that you don't get from its portable brother.

Unlike the vast majority of digital-to-analogue converters on sale, Chord uses its own custom-made digital conversion hardware. The Rob Watts-designed Field Programmable Gate Array at the heart of the Qutest

is not simply repurposing other peoples' ideas of DACs and digital filtering – it is exclusive to the brand, not bought off-the-shelf. The Watts Transient Aligned digital filter uses clever mathematics, implemented on a huge Xilinx Artix 7 FPGA to give a far higher tap-length than that seen in stock DAC chips. There are 49,152 taps, compared with 26,000 in its predecessor and approximately 150 in standard DACs, says Watts. This, he claims, translates to better time domain performance, among other things.

The Qutest features a USB Type-B input that runs up to 32-bit/768kHz resolution. Two BNC coaxial digital inputs are fitted offering the same specs, and the Toslink optical input goes up to 24-bit/192kHz. In addition to PCM it supports up to DSD512 (so-called octa-DSD). The dual BNCs flag up the prospect of dual data communications with a possible future Chord Electronics transport and/or upsampler. Unlike the Hugo 2, these inputs are galvanically isolated, which eliminates the transmission of digital noise via the digital outputs of lesser ancillaries. One pair of RCA phono outputs is fitted, and runs at a fixed level, but variable between 3V, 2V and 1V (changeable by pressing both Filter and Input buttons on

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Chord Electronics Qutest

PRICE
£1,195

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
DAC

WEIGHT
770g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
160 x 41 x 72mm

FEATURES
● 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD512-capable DAC
● Inputs: 1x optical; 1x USB-B; 2x BNC coaxial
● Output: 1x RCA phonos

DISTRIBUTOR
Chord Electronics Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01622 721444

WEBSITE
chordelectronics.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 436

others cannot. The Qutest is no exception – it's the cheapest serious digital converter that the company produces, yet you wouldn't be able to tell by listening to it. It's rather like its DAVE bigger brother – doing what all Chords do, albeit on not quite such a grand scale.

Sound quality

ABC's *Date Stamp* is a sugary piece of classic eighties pop, yet the Qutest captures the song's deep groove and from then on in you're hooked. Most rivals give you a strong and detailed presentation, but make the musicians sound like they're going through the motions. Bass guitar, for example, is really bouncy, but more than that it is delivered in perfect time relative to the rest of the mix; everything seems snappy and nicely syncopated and the Chord's great sense of timing is hard not to fall in love with.

In other respects, it's also highly accomplished. For example, it conjures up a deep and wide recorded acoustic. It's not spectacularly good, but of particular interest is the pinpoint precision with which instruments are located. It certainly makes the ABC track snap into focus, as if the auto-focus on your camera smartphone finally gets a lock on to what you want to photograph.

It's truly impressive on classical music, though, where things are done on a larger scale altogether. The way it hones in on different instrumental sections in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra's rendition of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, for example, is a revelation. The Qutest doesn't quite match the vast, panoramic scale of its DAVE bigger brother, but the recorded acoustic is still impressively wide; within this there's a fabulous sense of focus that makes things sound bold and highly defined.

You get this with jazz, too. My well-played Japanese Blue Note CD copy of Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* is a joy to hear. There is a great sense of being transported back – TARDIS-like – to the time and place of the recording. The soundstage is beautifully etched with the piano sounding so solid it could have been bricked into my listening room wall. What really strikes me here, though, is the sweet, smooth tonality of the Qutest. It sounds more natural than anything else at or near the price; it's smooth, even and is able to communicate the natural tonal patina of acoustic instruments surprisingly well. Some of its price rivals can strip the colour out of warm recordings, almost as if you've brought the

saturation setting right down to zero on your photo editing software. Whether it is strings or brass, the performance just sounds so much more natural and organic here.

Dynamically, the baby Chord is great. The real test of a DAC's mettle, however, is slow, soft soul, which can sound like wallpaper music through the wrong system. Rose Royce's beautiful *Wishing On A Star* sounds like anything but, transfixing me from the start. The way the Qutest carries the expressive emotion of the vocals is a delight. Not only is the timbre of the singer's voice a pleasure to hear, but the DAC is able to impart every last inflection. With out-and-out dynamic crescendos, there's just a hint of compression, but you'll have

The Qutest DAC is able to impart every last inflection of the singer's vocals

to spend a lot more money than this to find a DAC that does any better here. Allied to the Chord's lovely, beguiling rhythms, it makes for a superb listen – giving a spookily natural quality to the sound that is very impressive at the price.

Conclusion

Regardless of file format, sampling rate or input, I find that this is a great sounding digital converter – indeed spectacular at the price. You can run the gamut of your digital music collection – from classical to country, folk to electronic – and hear things presented in a detailed, intricate and incisive way, yet one that absolutely nails the basic emotion of the track. Even disregarding its superlative styling and build quality, the stellar sound quality alone warrants enthusiastic recommendation. Meet the new class of the field. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Beautifully etched, liquid sound; styling; build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Colour-based user interface can be hard to learn

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Superlative sound per pound; the one to beat

FEATURES



OVERALL



startup). This is a clever feature, because you can tune it for the sort of preamp you use – be it passive, solid-state, tube or whatever.

The John Franks-designed casework is new, and a dramatic improvement over what came before in my view. It brings a beautifully surfaced modern look, and is significantly heavier. Precision machined from solid aircraft-grade aluminium billet, the PCB sits in a smallish cavity inside the case. In addition to the trademark glass window – which is a great feature because it adds a bit of eye-catching drama that everyone in the household will love, as well as providing some practical visual indication of the sampling frequency by means of colour – there are two acrylic buttons that control the frequency-shaping filters, and input selection; again these change colour depending on the option selected. Like Henry Ford's Model T car, it's available in any colour you like as long as it's black; which is a bit of a shame because I feel I would opt for a silver version if one became available. Finally, power comes into the unit via a 5V, 2A micro USB supply.

Chord Electronics' DACs seem able to communicate particularly well at an emotional level, in a way that most



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iFi Audio nano iOne

INTERNALLY, THE CUTE nano iOne uses Burr-Brown's Bit-Perfect DSD & DXD MultiBit DAC, which handles up to 192kHz PCM, DSD256 and DXD384kHz natively so music stays in its original format throughout its journey through the DAC.

Audio signals come from the USB connector, S/PDIF via a combined RCA coaxial and optical input socket – a neat little adapter enables the coaxial input socket to also act as an optical input – or via aptX Bluetooth. The output is via a pair of RCA phono sockets and additionally from the S/PDIF socket for when you're using Bluetooth or USB inputs.

The iFi logo illuminates in different colours to indicate the input selected – blue for Bluetooth, green for USB or red for S/PDIF. Meanwhile, on the right, is a filter selector for choosing either a minimum phase digital filter – recommended for normal listening

– or a standard digital filter that iFi suggests for taking measurements.

Sound quality

I start off playing a 24/192 recording of Clare Teal with the Syd Lawrence Orchestra singing *Too Darn Hot*. As the opening saxophones lead into the vocals, the timing and pace is superb and the excitement is well conveyed.

Experimenting with the filter selector, I flip between the minimum phase and the standard digital filter positions. The standard position loses some bass depth and offers a more clinical sound compared with the minimum phase filter. This may suit those that prefer a brighter presentation.

On a 16/44.1 download of Michael Kaeshammer's *Caravan*, the piano playing is exciting and involving and the bass is once again tight and well controlled. The piano is particularly believable and the spatial imaging is



spot on. The hi-hats are precise and ring without any hint of edginess. The nano iOne produces a mellow and musical sound that's well suited to jazz.

Finishing off with a 24/192 download of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.5* played by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra gives an excellent performance. The piano playing sounds convincingly complex while the orchestral backing is full and exactly as it should be, showing the nano iOne to be a splendid DAC with excellent performance at the asking price. **NR**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio nano iOne

PRICE
£199

TELEPHONE
01900 601954

WEBSITE
selectaudio.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 431

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Mytek Liberty

DESIGNED IN THE USA and built in Poland, the Liberty is loaded to the gunwales with the latest technology. The inclusion of MQA, 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256 capability are the headline features, but more useful is the connectivity; USB Class 2 and AES/EBU digital inputs (handling PCM up to 192kHz, up to DSD64 DOP), plus two S/PDIF coaxial digital ins (PCM up to 192kHz, up to DSD64 DOP) and a Toslink optical input (PCM up to 192kHz, up to DSD64 DOP). RCA phono and twin balanced TRS outputs (TRS to XLR adapters are a cost option) complete the list.

Inside the tiny alloy chassis is an ESS Sabre 9018K2M digital converter chip, a low-noise clock generator with a claimed 10ps of jitter and a high current headphone amplifier offering a claimed 300mA, 3W power output.

Sound quality

Anyone that has listened to Mytek's Brooklyn DAC (HFC 416) won't be totally surprised by the sound of the Liberty; indeed it sounds very similar, but slightly 'shrunk in the wash'. This is not one of those hi-fi sources to snuggle up to, in front of an open fire and a bottle of Port. I'd liken it more to a strong lager with a twist of lime – it's a crisp, dry, refreshing sort of listen with lots of things to tingle the taste buds.

Tonally the Liberty is even and neutral, with just a little extra shine around the upper midband that gives things a little lift. You wouldn't call it forward, but it's not backward; rather there's a subtle glint to vocals that other DACs just don't quite pick up on. Judie Tzuke's *Welcome To The Cruise* can sound a little drab, but the Liberty manages to light up the recording. Its handling of Tzuke's



voice is really good; smooth and open, it makes for a very natural sound. Indeed, there is a directness and transparency that I wouldn't expect at the price. I find the same with Gregory Isaacs' *Night Nurse* with the Liberty able to cut through the various elements of the mix to convey a very plaintive-sounding vocal line.

This is a very capable DAC – it's very good in its own way, but the quality of the competition at the price makes life hard. For those wanting something small and special, this fits the bill and is well worth an audition. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mytek Liberty

PRICE
£895

TELEPHONE
01484 538438

WEBSITE
mytekdigital.com;
mcru.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 435

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★







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INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



**Hi-Fi
Choice**

RECOMMENDED

Audia Flight FL Three S

Being a thoroughly modern machine, this integrated amplifier has pretty much everything but the kitchen sink. That means four unbalanced analogue inputs, one balanced analogue in, one monitor in and one analogue in that can be assigned to bypass the preamp section; effectively making it a power amp. There's an optional MC/MM board, which replaces the first analogue in for £330, while the sixth input becomes a 24-bit/192kHz DAC when equipped with the optional £360 USB DAC board. In terms of outputs, there are unbalanced preamp and record outs, plus a headphone socket alongside the loudspeaker connections. In short, it's hard to think of anything that the FL Three S is missing – aside perhaps from DSD via USB.

Sound quality

I like the fact that the FL Three S isn't an in-your-face sounding design, trying at every given moment to show you just how feisty and relentless it is – this big Italian box takes a step back and deals with the music in a more louche way. Paul McCartney's *Girlfriend* is an interesting case in point – a super smooth song, it can sound rather flat on the wrong system, but this amplifier gets right to its heart. The sound is tonally warm, but still the amp ekes out the essential emotion. Everything is handled in a gentle yet assured, laid back yet resolute way. This is an amplifier that has an assured charm of its very own,

and while it certainly makes things engaging yet exceedingly pleasant to listen to – you might almost say it has a rather aristocratic nature.

Feed the FL Three S with some jazz and it's entirely in its element. Donald Byrd's *Street Lady* is a great post-bop Blue Note recording that almost borders on funk, and it's a lovely analogue recording. The Audia Flight takes to it like a duck to water; it's as if it was specifically designed to play this sort of music, making it sound beautiful to the ear. The shuffling rhythms have a lovely lilting quality to them, and I am impressed by the tonal purity of the brass instruments. Better still, this amplifier is sufficiently detailed for you to hear all the different strands in the mix play individually, rather than just producing a morass of sound. This is a trick that normally only good pre/power amplifier combos pull off, but this integrated does it without so much as raising an eyebrow. It's all in a day's work for this very impressive product, as you never get the sense that it's trying too hard. The song is rendered in a wonderfully enjoyable way – big soundstage, decent depth perspective, strong detail retrieval and fine dynamics, allied to convincing rhythms.

It's only with classical or techno that the charismatic Audia Flight's pleasing character ever gets found out. It's simply not clean enough to really zoom right in on a high-class recording and play it back in its unalloyed glory. The FL Three S just

can't seem to resist adding some of its own – admittedly very endearing – character to the proceedings. Kraftwerk's *The Robots* sounds just a little too bogged down in the bass; the amp has prodigious bass, which is great, but with large full-range loudspeakers it can sound just a little too bulbous. It's not quite as lithe as some similarly priced amplifiers, lacking grip. You hear this on great classical recordings too; the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Karajan doing Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* is a lovely thing to hear, but there's still a little plumpness in the lower frequencies that shouldn't really be there. That said, you can't criticise it for the cathedral-like recorded acoustic it conjures up or the pleasing rhythmic lilt of the music.

Conclusion

Even if it's not the most neutral or revealing of things, Audia Flight's FL Three S has real charm to its nature, and makes music a pleasure to listen to. Factor in the pleasing packaging and reasonably priced optional upgrades, and it's hard not to like. It's well worth an audition if you're in the market for an audiophile integrated amp at a great price. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audia Flight
FL Three S

PRICE
From £2,495

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
16.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 110 x 430mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 100W (8ohm)
- Class A up to 0.5W; then Class AB
- ALPS Blue volume potentiometer
- Optional MM/MC phono and USB DAC boards

DISTRIBUTOR
Elite Audio
Distribution Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01334 570666

WEBSITE
audia.it;
eliteaudiouk.com

REVIEWED
HFC 438

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Sweet sound; musical engagement; expansive soundstage

DISLIKE: Bass is a little looser than some rivals

WE SAY: A fine-sounding, cleverly packaged integrated



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INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



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RECOMMENDED

Audio Analogue AAcento

Hinting at its name AA'cento' refers to the amp's claimed 100W power output (into 8ohm). However, with a claimed 200W into 4ohm and 300W into a 2ohm load, this integrated should feel much more muscular than its base stats suggest. Audio Analogue is certainly confident that even tough speaker loads should be driven with ease. Yet, it is not just about out-and-out power.

At first glance it looks like a pure power amplifier, as there are few controls along the front panel. A sleek, brushed metal fascia is home to a central, chamfered dial and a number of tiny LEDs that only hint at features. The central hub can be rotated and depressed, with LEDs lighting up to reflect volume, but I need the printed manual to make sense of its understated Italian chic.

It has a single phono stage input that can be configured for MM or MC, three sets of unbalanced RCA line inputs and a balanced XLR in. There's the mono and stereo pre-out functionality alongside sturdy speaker outputs that accept all standard cable terminations and it also incorporates a pure Class A, zero feedback headphone amplifier.

Sound quality

Listening to Gary Numan's *My Name Is Ruin* on CD, the post-apocalyptic soundscape is presented in a compelling and potent way – the amp already signalling it has strong drive with plenty of power in reserve. Dense keyboard riffs feel solid with

deep bass that's properly 'phat', with a hint of extra warmth. And while the amp has serious drive, the power isn't held in a vice-like grip that can sometimes desiccate music. Instead, it has a lithe, visceral, almost organic drama. Some powerful amps will sound tighter with more punch and potentially greater transparency, but this one feels far more supple and musical. Numan's eerie vocals appear centre stage and the naturalness of the voice is remarkable. Any potential lack of transparency now feels entirely misplaced. The voice has a very realistic timbre that feels superbly detailed and nuanced and there is fantastic hear-through depth to the reverb on the vocals. There is a very natural ebb and flow to the music that feels silky and liquid, with a strong sense of dynamic light and shade. It isn't razor edged, but it is highly revealing, especially around critical midband frequencies and has almost valve-like qualities in the way it presents this dense, multi-layered track as a whole, rather than a series of spotlight parts. The soundstage isn't unusually wide, but it has a very natural, rounded depth. Instead of instruments strung along a notional washing line between and beyond the speakers, I get a real sense of three dimensionality and being able to look around each performer and the depth of the total performance.

The refined female vocals on *Steady* by The Staves are simply sumptuous. The AAcento's midband mastery allows each voice to be distinct, yet

the subtle blend of the three together is richly textured and entirely cohesive. I pick up new tiny inflections as lips part and breaths are taken that suggests the amp is both sensitive and extremely quiet, and the AAcento reveals subtle acoustic atmospheres that others can only hint at. Some will create more bite and a finer etch to treble detail, but the higher frequencies here are perfectly extended, sweet and never fatiguing.

Conclusion

This is an emotionally intelligent amplifier that gets the musical big picture spot on. It doesn't miss any detail, but instead majors on getting the meaning, drama and emotional story of your music correct. I sense a very gentle warmth that gives a pinch of richness and sweetness, yet vocals are as natural as I've heard. This may well be an amp for those that think they want a valve set up, but know it isn't practical. The phono stage is quiet and refined, but some might wish for a little more adjustment. Factor in a high-quality headphone stage and this beefy yet chic, artisan-built integrated adds up to be a highly addictive proposition that represents extremely good value. **CW**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio Analogue
AAcento
PRICE
£2,999
ORIGIN
Italy
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
14kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
445 x 92 x 400mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 100W (8ohm)
• Inputs: 3x RCA; 1x XLR
• MM/MC phono input
• Class A headphone amp
DISTRIBUTOR
Decent Audio
TELEPHONE
05602 054669
WEBSITE
decentaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 434

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Sublime midband; big picture prowess; speaker handling

DISLIKE: Slightly fiddly setup; lacks MC phono stage adjustments

WE SAY: Powerful yet sweet sound that's effortlessly musical

LINDEMANN.



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Hi-Fi
Choice

RECOMMENDED

Cyrus ONE HD

As a DAC-enabled, souped-up Cyrus ONE, the ONE HD ushers in a whole new world of digital connectivity, uprated Bluetooth and a claim for superior sound all round. If you've just bought a plain Cyrus ONE (HFC 420), this is probably the last thing you want to hear, but the HD checks in at £999, £300 more than the official retail price of the now 'basic' ONE, which continues and is still a cracking starter amp.

The HD applies extra socketry to an already crowded rear panel that, impressively, boasts two sets of speaker terminals to make bi-wiring that much easier. The additions are all digital and comprise optical, coaxial and Type-B asynchronous USB inputs, extending hook-up potential to laptop, TV and games console. These inputs all route to the new 32-bit on-board DAC.

The amp is still rated at 100W per channel into 6ohm, toting fourth generation Class D topology, while the Bluetooth spec goes from aptX to aptX HD for better sound quality from a wireless connection. There are three line-level analogue inputs, one of which can be configured with fixed gain to allow integration with a separate AV amp should you want to use the ONE HD as part of a home cinema setup. The provision of a separate Class AB headphone amp with a 6.35mm jack remains.

Likewise, the moving-magnet phono stage, which is based on the internals of Cyrus' outboard Phono Signature

(HFC 408). It's isolated from the rest of the electronics, which have been treated to upgrades to complement the fourth-gen Class D implementation.

Sound quality

It would be a little pointless continuing this review without a Cyrus ONE refresher. Teamed with a talented front end and speakers, the ONE is an amplifier that immediately sounds clean, crisp, spry, grippy and interesting. It's transparent, fast and, unusually at the price, has excellent powers of low-level resolution that renders fine detail missed by some rivals in a natural and unforced manner. Tonally, it can sound a tad lean but it has a deft way with dynamics combining explosive muscle and nuanced delicacy in a very grown-up, cohesive, high-end lite sort of way. Great stuff for a £700 amp.

Switching to the ONE HD is quite a step change. Streaming from Tidal, Paul Brown's version of Burt Bacharach's *I Say A Little Prayer* lends Jesse J's tasteful vocal more body, colour and tonal texture and places it in a plusher yet more intricately resolved setting. None of this slows up or blurs the amplifier's temporal skills one jot. A core Cyrus ONE HD skill. Moving on to a spot of hyper-space drumming with Carl Palmer from his *ELP Legacy Live* set on CD, that solid pace and precision that I first admired with the ONE stays exactly where it is. The surviving P's snare drum chops and tom-tom sweeps are as blistering as ever.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cyrus ONE HD

PRICE
£999

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
5.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 85 x 390mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 100W (6ohm)
- 32-bit/192kHz and DSD128-capable DAC
- Analogue inputs: 3x RCA analogue; MM phono stage
- Digital inputs: 1x optical; 1x S/PDIF; 1x USB
- Bluetooth aptX HD

DISTRIBUTOR
Cyrus Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 410900

WEBSITE
cyrusaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 440

Esperanza Spalding's off-kilter jazz stylings on *Emily's D+Evolution* – so hard to deliver without it sounding a little messy and confused – is a glowing triumph for the ONE HD, which homes in on her relentlessly potent performance on *Earth To Heaven* with zeal and exuberance, but without making a big deal of the less than immaculate recording. The ONE's speed and precision is preserved, but, remarkably, with greater depth and steadfast conviction by the newcomer.

The phono stage is a joy, too, giving a spot of pre-Randy Crawford Joe Sample a rich and harmonically replete rendition of his artfully tinkled ivories that's simply lovely. Arguably the biggest revelation, however, is Bluetooth aptX HD, which lifts Radio 4 on BBC iPlayer to a whole new level of intimacy.

Conclusion

Maybe this is the all-singing amp the Cyrus ONE should have been in the first place. There's no denying the hike in connectivity and sound quality is significant. If you've a grand burning a hole in your pocket and are in the market for an integrated amplifier with the right smarts and great sound, HD is the way to go. **DV**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Fast, clean, musically engaging sound; features; style

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Fascia feels too plasticky

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: The HD fully realises the ONE's potential and is a very talented all-rounder

FEATURES



OVERALL



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INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



**Hi-Fi
Choice**

RECOMMENDED

Pioneer A-40AE

Pioneer Corporation has just turned 80 years old, and to celebrate it has launched a new range of affordable integrated amplifiers – of which this is the mainstay. Perhaps surprisingly, it's not a Class D design; instead Pioneer has thought hard about getting its Class AB circuitry to give its best. It puts out a claimed 76W per channel into 4ohm, which is sufficient for power output to not really be an issue.

There are five line inputs, plus a moving-magnet phono and two digital inputs (optical and coaxial). A Wolfson DAC chip is fitted inside, giving 24-bit/192kHz digital playback. A fixed-line output is present for external headphone stages, and there's a Power Amp Direct facility switch on the front panel. This lets users bypass the preamplifier section/volume control, so you can feed it straight from a preamp or DAC with its own variable out. Two pairs of loudspeakers can be switched from the front panel, while the rear terminals boast chunky binding posts.

Sound quality

When it comes to affordable amps, there's a clear list of priorities. First, it needs to be powerful enough to drive most of the loudspeakers it's likely to be partnered with. The Pioneer A-40AE ticks this box. Second, it needs to be smooth enough to be listenable with the often rather bright sources it's likely to amplify – and

again it passes muster. But can it deliver that little bit extra – a sense of sparkle and fun to the music, that is so often lacking? Happily, thumbs are stuck firmly aloft to that, too.

With a smooth, spacious and balanced sound, the A-40AE makes music enjoyable to listen to. I kick off with some hardcore techno from Manix. *Hypnosis* isn't the highest of fidelity recordings, but it's a veritable audio assault course with powerful looped snare drums and rim shots, ringing hi-hats and massive swathes of sub-bass. It can sound harsh and disjointed on most budget kit, but the A-40AE proves surprisingly capable. First and foremost, it remains controlled at all times, never sounding soft. Via the line inputs it has a decently strong bass response, with an admirable degree of grip. The midband is couth and balanced, while the treble has a fair degree of space and atmosphere.

The Pioneer really catches the mood of Hall and Oates' *I Can't Go For That*, and shows great control as the bass can knock some budget amps off their perch. It catches the music's lovely groove with real aplomb, pulling the listener into the song and keeping them there. Rhythmically lithe, it never sounds leaden and always gets to the heart of the song. I love the way it deals with the brilliant hi-hat cymbal work on Rush's *Subdivisions* too – displaying real discipline allied to its ability to deliver serious amounts of clean power on this densely populated classic rock track.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pioneer A-40AE

PRICE
£400

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
8.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 129 x 323mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 52W (into 8ohm)
• 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC
• Analogue inputs: 5x RCA line; 1x MM phono
• Digital inputs: 1x optical; 1x coaxial
• 6.35mm headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR
Pioneer & Onkyo Europe GmbH

TELEPHONE
0203 9368086

WEBSITE
pioneer-audiovisual.eu/uk

REVIEWED
HFC 440

Soundstaging proves good at the price, but you are aware of its budget origins. It serves up a spacious recorded acoustic with David Bowie and Pat Metheny's *This Is Not America*, stretching wide stage left and right. However, don't expect to get all-encompassing, holographic imaging; instead stage depth is modest at best. It manages a decently immersive sound, with a fair degree of precision to its image placement, but it's not truly three dimensional. Somewhat disappointing is the built-in DAC, which sounds noticeably inferior to the line inputs – being cloudy and coarse compared with the high standards of the rest of the amp.

Conclusion

Thumbs firmly aloft for the A-40AE, then. At the price, it's highly capable and delivers a confident, mature, grown-up sound with enjoyment aplenty. There's a handy selection of features, and it is built well too – and offers enough output power for prospective purchasers not to have to worry about partnering it to insensitive standmount loudspeakers. This amp makes an excellent first step on the hi-fi ladder with enough power to party when it matters, too. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth yet satisfyingly musical sound; decent power

DISLIKE: Mediocre-sounding digital input

WE SAY: Fine-sounding low-cost integrated for anyone looking to start a hi-fi habit

NAD D 3020 V2

DESIGNED TO STAND upright, this Class D design claims 2x 30W RMS into 8ohm and uses the latest implementation of its PowerDrive circuitry with soft clipping to protect speakers from being over driven. It offers coaxial and optical digital inputs along with aptX Bluetooth wireless connectivity, but unlike the original D 3020 the USB port has been replaced with a moving-magnet phono stage.

Sound quality

Listening via the RCA phono aux input, it neatly balances refinement and attack with a 24/96 Qobuz Sublime+ stream of David Byrne's *American Utopia*. It shows off the recording's impressive production while Byrne's vocals are weighty, rich and beautifully placed within the expertly crafted soundstage of supporting instruments.

Everybody's Coming To My House hammers along with the restless energy that marks Byrne's work. The bassline isn't especially deep, but it ties the whole song together and conveys the sense of speed.

The delicacy of Fleet Foxes' *Oliver James* is handled extremely well and the soaring vocal solo is anchored to the centre of the soundstage and has wonderful three dimensionality. If you really lean on the NAD and play a 24/96 stream of David Bowie's *Girl Loves Me*, the presentation can become a little congested and turn hard with the vocal, although the punch and drive of the music remains intact and engaging throughout.

The performance via the optical digital input is a little more forward and well lit than with the RCA aux input playing a Quad Elite CDS CD player (HFC 383) over both connections. This isn't so severe as



to make one sound significantly better than the other, but I do find myself leaning towards the RCA aux input over the digital one.

The D 3020 V2 is a very modern take on an integrated amplifier and it makes a lot of sense at the price. It has a propulsive and balanced sound that plenty of entry-level audio fans are going to love. For people balancing analogue and digital sources it is a practical revision and a classic starter amp in the making. **LD**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
NAD D 3020 V2

PRICE
£399

TELEPHONE
01732 459555

WEBSITE
nadelectronics.com

REVIEWED
HFC 435

OUR VERDICT



PMC Cor

RESOLUTELY ANALOGUE IN all senses of the word, the Cor is built around a Class A/B amplification stage, claiming a healthy 2x 95W into 8ohm (rising to 140W into 4ohm). PMC's design is to provide an amplifier with no sonic character of its own, one that simply adds gain. It is fitted with four RCA line inputs and a single balanced one on XLR connections. There's also an AV bypass for use with multi-channel installations and a headphone amp with a full-size 6.35mm jack.

Sound quality

Listening to the 16/44.1 download of Wild Beasts' *Last Night All My Dreams Came True*, it does a good job of delivering on its promise of studied neutrality. There's little sense of there being any aspect of the performance that you can pin on being down to its influence. This

doesn't mean that it is in any way dull. With an exciting and urgent live performance of *He The Colossus* from *Boy King*, the Cor reproduces the frenetic energy and potent drumming without softening the impact or prettifying up the raucous edge. There's a commendable sense of spaciousness and three dimensionality to the presentation, too. Give it the merest glimpse of a soundstage, and it always strives to create a believable space.

Where it really comes into its own is when you partner it in such a way as to induce any character further up the signal path. Connected to the sweet-sounding Lindemann Limetree phono stage (see p109) and a Goldring Legacy moving-coil cartridge, you can really appreciate what a happy partnership they create. If genuine neutrality is what you seek, it is



possible to create it, but the Cor's ability to emphasise what you already like about your system without adding more variables is arguably even more desirable.

This feels like a product that's been built because PMC wanted to and not because it had a commercial point to prove. Those that are used to amps that add a little colour of their own might find it an odd first listen and its aesthetics are certainly very much a matter of taste. But its ability to deliver large amounts of gain and effortlessly transmit the musical message is not in question, and for many hi-fi fans this will be the last amplifier they ever need to buy. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
PMC Cor

PRICE
£4,995

TELEPHONE
01767 686300

WEBSITE
pmc-speakers.com

REVIEWED
HFC 441

OUR VERDICT



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













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Navis

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INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



Primare I15 Prisma

This small-footprint integrated amplifier packs in more features than most – Primare’s Terry Medalen describes it as offering “a bundle of the most commonly used connectivity platforms – Bluetooth, AirPlay, Spotify Connect and Chromecast built in – so that anyone in the household can comfortably use the system”. In effect, it’s far more connected to the outside world than most, and it’s all easily app controllable.

It puts out a claimed 2x 60W into 8ohm, while its AKM AK4490EQ DAC chip supports up to 384kHz PCM and DSD128 via its USB-B port, plus the usual WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, MP3, MP4 (AAC), WMA and OGG files.

The Prisma control app – iOS or Android – is a joy to use and lets you get music from Bluetooth, AirPlay, streaming services such as Spotify Connect or your NAS drive. An R15 MM/MC phono stage is coming soon, we’re told, and it will also do an analogue-only version of the I15 with optional MM phono board (£1,125), that can be paired with the matching CD15 Prisma CD and network player to create a compact, powerful, and refined digital and analogue system.

Sound quality

A pretty small thing by conventional standards, the I15 Prisma manages to punch out a powerful and engaging sound. While not quite the equal of the best purpose-designed integrations at its price, it sounds way better than it has

a right to, given its size and enormous flexibility. The Prodigy’s *Invaders Must Die* via one of the digital inputs has most amplifiers gasping for oxygen just seconds in. It’s massively compressed and loaded with thick, fat slabs of bass. The pretty little Primare packs a serious punch considering its size and price, going louder than expected and with grace. There is a little hardening of the sound at really high levels, but there’s a general sense of control and poise.

At the same time, the tonality is smooth and even. There’s little sign of any brittleness across the midband, and no nasties in the treble. Bass is dry and well formed, but not exactly sumptuous. The result is a balanced sound that one might call clean. Annie Lennox’s electrifying cover of Neil Young’s *Don’t Let It Bring You Down* displays lots of detail and a mesmerising grip to her vocals. As we all know, that’s quite a hard, brittle voice she has there, with a steely tonality to it – brilliant as it is. Yet the I15 Prisma delivers it in a smooth and crisp way right between the speakers, refusing to let it grate.

With Saxon’s *747 (Strangers In The Night)* it proves adept at signposting the extremes of the soundstage, giving a widescreen presentation that’s confident with big, broad brushstrokes of sound. In absolute terms, stage depth is a bit curtailed, but I’m impressed by the large sound that’s coming out of such a small box.

Rhythmically the I15 Prisma is not the most romantic-sounding amplifier

and doesn’t whisk you off to a work of exotic, supple rhythms that make music like you’ve never heard before. Instead it’s a grafter – it gets the job done and does the least possible to get in the way.

I like the precise, ordered musical flow of Uncle Bob’s *Burly House* via my Western Digital NAS drive. The leading edges of notes and beats of this shuffling nineties trance classic are resolved well. Although it gives a pacy and engaging sound, it lacks that last degree of dynamic articulation that really makes music come alive and I think of the Primare as a smooth and accurate listening partner, rather than a seat-of-the-pants adrenaline rush.

Conclusion

Despite its copious amounts of facilities, you shouldn’t think of the I15 Prisma as a lightweight in the sonic stakes. It has a dry and accurate presentation, rather than embellishing the music, but it’s always fun and is backed up by plenty of power, too. Smooth, tough and sophisticated, it shows that in today’s hi-fi world, you can have convenience, style and musical satisfaction in one box, at a very reasonable price. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Primare I15 Prisma

PRICE
£1,600

ORIGIN
Sweden

TYPE
Integrated amplifier/
DAC/network music
player

WEIGHT
6.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
350 x 73 x 329mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power
output: 2x 60W
(8ohm)
• 24-bit/384kHz
PCM and DSD128-
capable DAC
• Inputs: 1x RCA;
1x 3.5mm jack;
3x optical; 1x
coaxial; 1x USB-B
• Supports: Prisma;
wi-fi; AirPlay;
Bluetooth; Roon;
Chromecast

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma AV

TELEPHONE
01423 358846

WEBSITE
karma-av.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 442

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Crisp, clean, smooth, detailed sound; sleek styling

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Lacks ultimate focus and grip at the price

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Brilliant listener-friendly package with style aplenty

FEATURES



OVERALL



RE/POWER AMPLIFIER



Mitchell & Johnson

S800/S815

Made entirely in the UK, this flagship pre/power combo offers an impressive balance of power and precision

As the first two pieces in Mitchell & Johnson's top-of-the range 800 Series, this £2,598 amplifier combo is designed, engineered and built in the UK. The S800 preamp sports both moving-coil and moving-magnet phono stages and has a good quality ESS Sabre 9018 DAC with XMOS synchronous USB input and three optical and three coaxial digital inputs. This makes it the beating heart of any modern hi-fi system, with six analogue inputs – five unbalanced RCA plus one balanced XLR –

including the aforementioned discrete phono stage with op-amp buffer. Outputs include two unbalanced RCA phonos plus one balanced XLR. There are fixed-level sockets for left and right subwoofers and line-level outs for a recorder. Also onboard is a headphone amplifier stage – based around a Texas Instruments op-amp – with a full-size front fascia-mounted 6.35mm headphone jack socket.

The fascia is hewn from brushed aluminium with almost flush machined aluminium volume and source selection controls, with standby mode and IR sensors both set

deep into it. The volume attenuator itself is a Burr-Brown analogue type using a resistor ladder and digital control chip. There's a centrally mounted blue backlit LCD panel that shows the source selected and the volume level. It is decently readable from a distance, but its pixelated look is no match for the fine-pitch OLED displays found on some similarly priced rivals. A full-function remote control is supplied.

The S815 power amplifier shares the same casework, but of course has a different fascia. It features twin stereo power meters – or at least they're marked as showing power output yet oddly are calibrated in volume units, along with a peak LED. They illuminate blue on black, so aren't the easiest things to read – even if they were worth reading. There's a similar on/standby toggle switch to the S800. Around the back, there's both RCA and XLR inputs, with twin gold-plated loudspeaker binding posts. A 12V power link gives simultaneous startup when used in conjunction with the S800 preamp. Inside, Noratel XW eXtra Quiet toroidal transformers are fitted and extensive heatsinking for the two pairs of six Toshiba output transistors, which run in Class AB to produce a claimed 150W RMS per side into 8ohm, and almost twice that into 4.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mitchell & Johnson
S800

PRICE
£1,299

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Preamplifier

WEIGHT
5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 310 x 110mm

FEATURES
• 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC
• Analogue inputs: 5x RCA; 1x XLR
• Digital inputs: 3x optical; 3x coaxial; 1x USB Type-B port
• MM/MC phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR
MIAN Audio
Distribution

TELEPHONE
01223 782474

WEBSITE
mitchellandjohnson.com

REVIEWED
HFC 443

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mitchell & Johnson
S815

PRICE
£1,299

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Power amplifier

WEIGHT
16kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 310 x 110mm

FEATURES
• Class AB design
• Quoted power
output: 2x 150W
(8ohm)
• Inputs: 1x RCA;
1x balanced XLR
• VU power meters

DISTRIBUTOR
MIAN Audio
Distribution

TELEPHONE
01223 782474

WEBSITE
mitchellandjohnson.
com

REVIEWED
HFC 443

is well carried and the result is the song moves along with a real sense of pace and direction. Moving to REM's *The Flowers Of Guatemala*, a crisp mid-eighties rock recording, and the result is no less fun. Although this pre/power doesn't ram the song's rhythms down your throat, it's nevertheless very much up for fun. The song itself has frequent stops and starts with a relatively slow tempo, and this can descend into a dirge when played through the wrong amplifier. Yet this is never the case here and the bass guitar in particular is singled out for its power and precision. Even when things build to a crescendo, the S800/S815 pairing proves to be totally in control and able to keep a grip on the proceedings with a sense of authority and poise.

Feed these amplifiers some gentle jazz funk in the shape of Freeez's *Caribbean Winter*, and again they make a nice noise. The soundstage is pretty wide and falls back a fair way. It doesn't have the holographic quality of some integrations at this price, yet what it loses on the roundabouts it gains on the swings,

The more you play music through the S800 and S815, the more you enjoy it

so to speak. Instruments, such as the rhythm guitar, keyboards and vocals are located with a good deal of precision, and more importantly never seem to get knocked off course as the music builds to a crescendo. The complex solo passage is handled very well, these amplifiers showing the impressive grip they have.

Switching inputs, I move to the preamplifier's internal DAC. I spin up Madness' *Grey Day* on my CD player and sit back to hear a surprisingly engaging and solid sound. If anything, the soundstage improves slightly here, with more solid images stretching a little further left and right. The music bounces along cheerily, and there is a good deal of detail, too. Although in absolute terms it doesn't quite have the panoramic views of the analogue input when fed by a very expensive digital front end or some of the subtlety, the S800 has a decently implemented, high-quality DAC that most won't feel the need to change.

Fed by an Audio-Technica AT-33PTG moving-coil cartridge (HFC 402), the built-in phono stage proves surprisingly good considering the

price, with a crisp rendition of The Box Tops' *The Letter*, with lots of bounce and body – plus a good deal of detail clearly discernible.

The downsides of this combination are few at the price. In absolute terms it's just a little grey and foggy in the midband, but few price rivals I can think of do better and its treble is decently smooth, but lacks that last nth degree of air and space. Dynamically it is really rather capable – able almost to smash down walls on musical crescendos played at high volumes – yet it doesn't track the tiny inflections of players quite as well as some. Bass is solid and workmanlike and turns in a very good result, sounding more like a serious mid-price amp than a budget one.

Conclusion

It's easy to like this pre/power amplifier combo, and it does a lot of things very well for the money. It's designed to be a flexible powerhouse that offers very good value, and the designers have hit the sweet spot. It might lack the ergonomic refinement of more established brands, yet needs to make no apologies for its sound. Well worth an audition, and if the same high standards are met with the rest of the range, we await its arrival with keen interest. **DP**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT: S800

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Clean sound; digital inputs; flexibility

DISLIKE: Front panel controls could be smoother in use

WE SAY: Versatile and capable mid-price preamplifier offering

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT: S815

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Plenty of clean power; soundstage; great musicality

DISLIKE: Meaningless VU meters

WE SAY: Impressive powerhouse with musical appeal

Both preamp and power amp come in a choice of silver or black finishes.

Sound quality

There's something fundamentally right about this Mitchell & Johnson pre/power combo. It's hard to put one's finger on it, because the sound isn't especially showy or dramatic. There are no sonic fireworks, yet the more you play music through it, the more you enjoy it. You can tell it has been well voiced with a decent amount of solid-state punch and thump. Yet it's also subtle and sophisticated too.

Fed from a dCS Debussy DAC, Public Service Broadcasting's *Sputnik* shows the combo's all-round ability. This slice of modern progressive rock with electronica mixed in, comes over with more clarity than you'd expect for £2,600. Tonally it is spry, with no particular sense of coloration or harshness and it casts a whitish light on the recording rather than tinting it for a smoother listen. Yet there's little in the way of glare, and that makes it easy to listen to for long periods. There's a tidiness to *Sputnik*, which the Mitchell & Johnson duo really picks up on, giving a clean window into the mix and letting the listener look around inside.

Rhythmically it's impressive, too – the song's subtle metronomic beat

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POWER AMPLIFIER



**Hi-Fi
Choice**

RECOMMENDED

Leema Acoustics Hydra II

As an intelligent and flexible stereo power amplifier the 'Anniversary Edition' of Leema's well-regarded Hydra II power amplifier can also be bridged for use as a monoblock, should you lust for even more power. Rated at 148W power output per channel into 8ohm, it may not appear overly muscular but it is claimed to tolerate even the most recalcitrant of loudspeakers.

Around the back, primary input is via single, balanced XLR or unbalanced RCA selectable by a small push button just below the level of the back plate. Likewise, a similar, secreted button needs to be selected to instruct the amp to be in regular stereo mode or become bridged as a single-channel monoblock. Small, three-position toggle switches also need to be set to confirm two-channel or left or right monoblock usage. A further toggle switch also needs to be set to confirm whether the unit is to be used in a surround capacity, fixed gain or to be controlled by Leema's proprietary LIPS (Leema Intelligent Protocol System) communication system with other compatible Leema products via a single XLR or 3.5mm connection.

Further RCA points enable pre out, bi-amp out and multi-channel inputs, and the busy rear panel is completed with an IEC power input and sturdy speaker binding points that accept all

common terminations with guidance on how they should be used in a monoblock configuration.

Sound quality

Spinning *Fight For Your Mind* by Ben Harper on vinyl, the opening funky bass groove is deep and solid with superb speed and definition. The bass riff sounds like an articulate lead instrument played with human panache, rather than just deep, bubbling tones somewhere in the background. Likewise, a tight snare drum rings out like gunshots, with extra bite and faster recovery than I'm used to, while sparkling bells sweetly ring across a wide soundstage. Each of these qualities in isolation would be great, but it's their marriage that's so notable. Solid-state amplification can excel in communicating one thing at a time well, with a spotlight moving between instruments, but here the unburstable power reserves render the entire soundscape as a single, far more compelling whole. Harper's vocals join the mix and the voice is depicted beautifully. It is not power that's decisive, rather that the amp's refinement enables tiny, emotive inflections to stand out, but without graininess, unsullied by low-level distortion or noise.

Playing *The Grid* on CD from *Koyaanisqatsi* by Philip Glass, the cleanliness and absence of distortion

encourages me to inch the volume up and soon the dynamic, revolving arpeggios and haunting organ drones fill my room. If anything, this amp seems to get better with volume, entering a kind of power band that just lets music flow unfettered.

Fast, pulsing bass notes have real depth and far greater definition than I expect, each with a leading edge and decay. The choir soars above the mesmerising rhythms, injecting extra richness and depth. The voices have vivid detail yet natural warmth that is almost valve-like in its unforced fluidity. Yet whatever the complexity, the Hydra II remains absolutely unflappable. Lesser power amps miss some of the detail or fail to portray the whole convincingly, but this one manages to nail them both.

Conclusion

At first glance this might appear to be an artisan, hand-built powerhouse of single-minded purpose with some fiddly switchgear, but beneath the understated looks and fine machining it is a seriously intelligent and highly flexible tool. Rarely do so many musical virtues come together in such a coherent whole, especially when paired with other Leema products. **CW**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Leema Acoustics
Hydra II
Anniversary Edition

PRICE

£4,795

ORIGIN

UK

TYPE

Power amplifier

WEIGHT

18kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
440 x 110 x 320mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 148W (8ohm)
- Bridgeable design
- Inputs: 1x balanced XLR; 3x unbalanced RCA
- Output: 1x RCA

DISTRIBUTOR

MIAN Audio
Distribution

TELEPHONE

01223 782474

WEBSITE

leema-acoustics.com

REVIEWED

HFC 439

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth refined power; detail without grain; build

DISLIKE: Slightly fiddly switches and setup process

WE SAY: A superb all-rounder that matches power and control with insight and subtlety

CD PLAYER/INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



YBA Heritage CD100/A100

This distinctive CD player and integrated amplifier setup from across the channel combines Gallic flair and great value

Launched in France in 1981 by electronics professor Yves-Bernard André, YBA today is a very different thing to the company that it once was. The company describes its products as being “designed in France, made with passion”, deftly circumnavigating the fact its majority shareholder is now the Shenzhen Shanling Digital Technology Development Company, which is a prominent Chinese hi-fi marque. In 2009, Shanling purchased a controlling stake in the brand, and all production aside from the flagship statement range went East. Founder André is still very much a driving force however, and there’s no denying the distinctive and pleasingly quirky French feel of even the company’s

affordable audiophile Heritage range – to which the CD100 CD player and A100 integrated amplifier you see here belong. It offers a good taste of the higher end products but at a more accessible price, only made possible by manufacturing on the other side of the world.

Unboxing these two components, you’re struck by the interesting design cues. The fascia and top/side casing are finished in lavish brushed aluminium – available in both silver and black – which is reminiscent of Shanling products of yore. The main power switch on both units is underneath, and when you’ve located this and switched on you’ll see a rather nice warm yellow/burnt orange display illuminate in the central window.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
YBA Heritage
CD100

PRICE
£1,200

ORIGIN
France/China

TYPE
CD player

WEIGHT
5.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 118 x 372mm

FEATURES

- Wolfson WM8740 DAC, 24-bit/192kHz PCM compatible
- Switchable upsampling filtering
- Digital inputs: 1x coaxial; 1x USB
- Outputs: 1x RCA; 1x XLR; 1x coaxial

DISTRIBUTOR
Nintronics Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01707 320788

WEBSITE
ybahifi.com

REVIEWED
HFC 437

The CD100 is not your bog-standard silver disc spinner either; the main power switch – and indeed all the other controls – are toggles. They comprise power, stop/play/pause – pulling this toggle up ejects the disc – track search up/down and finally Sample Rate Conversion, or upsampling to 192kHz. Around the back is a choice of RCA unbalanced or balanced XLR analogue outputs and a coaxial digital output should you wish to use it as a transport. A coaxial and USB Type-B digital input are also present, so the unit can work as a DAC. The heart of the machine is a 24-bit/192kHz Wolfson WM8740 DAC.

As you would expect, the amplifier is a close visual match – and equally quirky to use. Its central display shows the source selected, and has two rotary controls – for volume and source selection – instead of the toggle switches. These work well and are nice to operate. It sports three feet rather than the usual four, and a remote is supplied that gives access to all the functions. This is a pretty substantial item with a quality feel, and works with any YBA product.

The amplifier has five pairs of RCA stereo inputs, plus one balanced XLR. The video input has a bypass feature, which is effectively a direct ‘power amp in’ so that it doesn’t go via the preamp. There’s also a handy

CD PLAYER/INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

DETAILS

PRODUCT
YBA Heritage A100

PRICE
£1,500

ORIGIN
France/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
9.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 118 x 400mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 100W RMS (8ohm)
• Inputs: 5x RCAs; 1x balanced XLR
• Preamp output

DISTRIBUTOR
Nintronics Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01707 320788

WEBSITE
ybahifi.com

REVIEWED
HFC 437

good deal of filigree detail, and a general rhythmic push to the track that makes it a pleasure to listen to. This is a slightly cloudy, opaque sort of recording and the CD100/A100 does little to cut through the mist – this duo doesn't have an ultra-detailed sound, yet the fundamentals of its performance are so good that I'm not left wishing it did.

Interestingly, the bass isn't the tightest I've ever heard, yet the song powers along with real gusto and a sense of purpose and drive. Things are definitely a little soft low down, yet the combo is able to keep enough control to stop the music becoming a meandering mess. Indeed, this makes for quite a euphonic sound – reminiscent of the classic NAD 3020 integrated in the way it delivers a big, warm, bouncy performance that really hits the spot. The combination of rhythmic dexterity, plus a decent amount of power makes the track really get cooking. At the other end of the frequency extreme, hi-hat cymbals sound silky and sweet, albeit not quite as open and delicate as more costly hi-fi products. Indeed the

The brooding power is something I hadn't expected from a combo at the price

whole sound is slightly sepia-tinged, bringing a pleasant and inviting tonality to everything it touches – even if it's not strictly accurate.

Nu Era's *Lines Between Us* from the *Geometricks* EP is a modern take on classic nineties electro, with an elastic bass synthesiser line dominating the mix, in front of thick washes of warm analogue synthesiser pads, and delicate looped hi-hats behind. It can sound like a fat blob of sound that saunters along for five minutes on the wrong system, but not here. Although the track is quite compressed, the CD100/A100 is able to scythe through the mix and take control of the proceedings. It allows each strand to play along irrespective of what the others are doing, and placing them in space accurately. The soundstage is wide and inside it, instruments don't all cluster up and congeal together. Along with the decent power and warm bass, this is the other facet to the YBA combo that makes it so satisfying; there's a lot of room to roam, so to speak, and insight into the recording acoustic that it sets up. It has a large, ebullient, outgoing nature that really fills the room.

This facet of its performance really comes to the fore with classical music. Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring* proves an interesting test; there is some lack of low-level detail to proceedings that marks the YBA combo down, but you really have to remind yourself of its price at times like this. Despite this last nth degree of focus, there is a great sense of scale to the concert hall, especially left to right, and I can't help but feel that I want to peer deep inside. As the first movement progresses, I am suddenly reminded of the power of this dynamic duo. It's very good at tracking dynamics, giving a lithe and responsive sound that goes loud at the drop of a hat. This brings a real sense of menace and brooding power to the track and is something that I hadn't expected from a combo at the price.

Conclusion

With a fairly dated DAC in the CD player and no gimmicks in the amp, this combo boasts no hi-tech trickery. Yet it proves to be lovely sounding, in a most pleasing way. Regardless of the type of music you choose to play on the YBA CD100/A100, it gives an immersive yet energetic rendition and really lets the emotion out. Its combination of Gallic flair and great value is hard to fault. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: CD100

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Clean, open, musical sound; design

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Hard-to-reach power switch

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Charming and capable CD player

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: A100

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Sweet, warm, musical sound; lots of power

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Slightly loose bass

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Enjoyable and engaging integrated

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

preamplifier output for those using a separate power amplifier or sub. A single set of loudspeaker binding posts is fitted. The manufacturer claims 100W RMS per channel into 8ohm, or 150W into 4. No doubt the chunky 320VA power transformer helps to deliver this.

Sound quality

Not particularly familiar with this brand, I don't know what to expect – but am very pleasantly surprised. Right from switch-on I characterise the sound of the YBA combo as rather 'old school', and I mean this in the nicest possible way. Instead of the bland, anodyne and clinical sound that you can sometimes get from rival components at the price, things are quite warm, colourful and sweet sounding – with a very pleasing rhythmic gait. The CD100/A100 isn't the most forensically detailed combination ever made, but it is certainly subtle and finessed.

I kick off my listening with Steve Hackett's *Narnia*, a laid-back slice of late-seventies progressive rock. It's not the greatest of recordings, but really takes off via a decent system. The YBA pair instantly gets its measure, giving a snappy rendition of the opening electric guitar arpeggios, and is ready to lift up its skirt and run as the first verse kicks in. There is a

ONE-BOX SYSTEM



Naim Uniti Star

It's time to go star gazing as we sample Naim's stellar Uniti streaming system with built-in amplifier and CD playback

Although Naim has built its reputation making distinctive and capable traditional hi-fi separates, it's now venturing into making products such as the Uniti Star all-in-one system. It's a fascinating offering inasmuch as it infuses more than a whiff of its brand's traditional values into a new and different platform. Put simply, this product is 'hi-fi without ears' as it crams traditional Naim purist thinking into just one box. Yet looked at another way, you could also say it's a 'style system for audiophiles', because it offers all the functionality of trendy products from lesser manufacturers, but with Naim DNA to deliver serious sound. Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter what you call it or how you frame it; the real

question is how good is it at the all-important task of making music with the minimum of fuss?

As you take it out of the box, you're immediately struck by its weight. Look closer and you'll admire its finely textured, brushed aluminium finish and large rotary controller. The front-mounted LCD screen fires up with a full-colour splash graphic and suddenly you get a sense that it's actually a rather exotic consumer electronics product. After 15 seconds, the menu screen appears. Here you discover that it can play your networked music, analogue or digital inputs, CD and internet radio or streaming services. Pair the fancy backlit remote control, and you can configure the wi-fi, whereupon the Uniti Star really springs into action.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Uniti Star

PRICE
£3,499

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
One-box system

WEIGHT
13kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 95 x 265mm

FEATURES

- CD; UPnP streaming; aptX Bluetooth; AirPlay
- 24-bit/384kHz and DSD128-capable DAC
- Claimed power output: 2x 70W (8ohm)
- Digital inputs: 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB; 1x HDMI
- Analogue inputs: 1x RCA; 1x DIN
- Chromecast support; integrated Spotify and Tidal streaming

DISTRIBUTOR
Naim Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01722 426600

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 433

Download the excellent free Naim app (available for both iOS or Android devices) and you have full control of its functions. The fascia-mounted slot-loading CD drive lets you play or rip your own compact discs (to an external drive; none is fitted inside), and it can play music via its front-mounted USB socket. There's full UPnP streaming (wired or wireless) and aptX Bluetooth functionality too. It has Chromecast and Apple's AirPlay built-in, and if you're an old-school radio listener, you can specify the optional (£150) FM/DAB radio module.

Inside, it's jam-packed with circuitry, yet extremely neatly laid out. The designers chose to retain a Class AB power amplifier section (rather than a more compact Class D) derived from the Supernait and it offers a claimed 70W RMS per channel into 8ohm. Factor in the large toroidal transformer, and you could say it's an exercise in packaging the likes of which we haven't seen since the original Mini. Yet at the same time there is real audiophile attention to detail; for example, the analogue and digital circuit boards are carefully separated, and optical isolators are used too. Even the mains plug is mechanically isolated, preventing ground or rear wall-borne vibration feeding into the unit.



ONE-BOX SYSTEM

bi-directional backlit remote control is made of plastic, which also lets the side down slightly. The disc drive is reasonably fast, but a little noisier than hoped and oddly sometimes the display asks me if I would like to play the CD when a disc is already in the process of playing.

Sound quality

Sonically, no one will ever find the Uniti Star bland. It's a positive and purposeful performer that doesn't need to do any soul searching before it goes out to bat. You can play the most anodyne of easy listening tracks and still this system cuts right to the musical chase. Suddenly you can feel the music's phrasing, its expressiveness and sense of drama. There's no chance of you being able to sit a track out, half asleep on the sofa as it plays. Instead this new Naim grabs things by the scruff of the neck and shakes hard. Those wanting a smooth system to relax with, as they sip a whiskey and water before bed are advised to look elsewhere – this is the sort of sound that makes you want to crack open a can and do an all-nighter.

Kicking off with the CD player, the Uniti Star makes Marillion's *Kayleigh* into a big, bombastic stadium rocker. So many all-in-one systems seem to turn it into Smooth Radio material, but here it fizzles with power and pizzazz. It has a wonderful way of conveying the song's emotional intensity via the music's phrasing; it's a highly propulsive listen that really gets the feet tapping. It sounds unlike other single-boxers, imparting an urgency and intensity to the sound that's quite unexpected from a product like this.

Indeed, it makes all types of music memorable, from Simon and Garfunkel's soft and lilting *Bookends* to Steve Hackett's spikier *Voyage Of The Acolyte*. It has a certain tonal warmth and fullness to the sound that's pleasingly euphonic if not strictly neutral. The Naim doesn't stray too far off the beaten track here, but does present its own distinctive reading of a recording, which gives a full and firm upper bass to pretty much everything you play, along with a warmish midband and crisp treble. It's a most agreeable character, but tends to infuse into everything that's played, whatever the original recording sounds like.

Suddenly Isaac Hayes' lush *Soulsville* doesn't seem that different in tonality to The Smiths' chilly *The Queen Is Dead*. This is where Naim separates tend to do better, offering up greater insight and more neutrality. For example, Led Zeppelin's *Rain* Song at

24/96, streamed via my Western Digital UPnP NAS drive, is a joy. It's quickly accessed – via the app – and glitch-free. Sonically it is superb, really lifting the bar. I love the lustre of the cymbals and piano, and the strong but grainy lead vocal. Once again, the Uniti Star strings all the different musicians and layers of sound together in a brilliantly syncopated way. The energy and raw emotion are a delight, and I find myself focusing on the song itself rather than the quality of the recording – just as it should be.

Across all inputs it excels itself, given its modest price and compact size. The DAC is a really classy affair and sings with an external CD transport or Blu-ray player. With Crosby, Stills and

The Naim Uniti Star grabs things by the scruff of the neck and shakes hard

Nash's *Wooden Ships*, I am struck by its ability to throw the soundstage deep into the listening room, running wide from left to right. At the same time it is fulsome, gutsy and tracks dynamics brilliantly. The analogue inputs are very strong too, if not quite so direct and engaging. Although limited, even Bluetooth makes listening fun.

Conclusion

It is practically impossible to find fault with Naim's new Uniti Star at the price; it is fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality. True, it doesn't quite have the forensic detail resolution of an equivalently priced system made up of separate components, but it is still there or thereabouts. Stellar stuff, but where it really shines is the way that it manages to bring everything together so effortlessly in one compact, stylish case. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Engaging musical sound; flexibility; build and style; completeness

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Occasional CD drive glitches

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Brilliantly capable and versatile one-box music system

FEATURES



OVERALL



The SATA-connected TEAC optical drive is run with a true 'many read' algorithm and memory buffer. The Burr-Brown PCM1791A DAC plays lossless PCM music files in WAV, FLAC, AIFF and ALAC formats, as well as lossy MP3, AAC and Ogg Vorbis, and supports up to DSD128 playback – although the internal disc drive won't play SACDs. There's a bespoke headphone amplifier with its own fascia-mounted 3.5mm jack. Antennae for both wi-fi and Bluetooth are inside and it's the latest type, supporting both 2.4 and 5GHz, and performs superbly on test. There are twin optical digital inputs (up to 24-bit/96kHz), two coaxials (24-bit/192kHz), BNC, USB Type-A, HDMI ARC and two analogue inputs (stereo RCAs and DIN).

The first point of contact with the Uniti Star is its large top-mounted rotary controller, which has a lovely action; taken from the high-end NAC-N 272 network music player/preamp/DAC (HFC 400). The Uniti casework feels extremely solid and echoes the slick feel of the brand's traditional components and high level of finish. The extruded aluminium heatsinks are nicely integrated into the overall proportions of the product. The glass cover for the LC display is classy; the screen is easy to read from middle distance, but doesn't have the contrast that we're used to from OLEDs. The



Quad Artera Solus

Looking for a CD-based system that simply requires you to add speakers? Quad's Artera Solus might just have your needs covered

Quad's compact and dapper Artera family of solid-state components – so far the Play (a combined CD transport, DAC and preamp) and the Stereo (a power amp) – has managed to be both high functioning and lifestyle literate, which is trickier than it might seem. But not quite as tricky as folding all of the above (plus streaming) into a single Artera chassis. Equipped with aptX Bluetooth providing basic streaming to sit alongside its CD transport, DAC and amplification, the Artera Solus will be joined by a premium version adding app-controlled wi-fi network streaming to its repertoire for around £2,000. Quad freely admits: "It was a real challenge to make the individual parts – the CD transport, the DAC,

the digital streaming, the analogue preamp and power amp – perform to the level of a full separates system in keeping with Quad's high standards... Placement of components has been especially critical, together with careful routing of the four-layer printed circuit board, use of balanced circuitry to minimise interference and extensive power supply isolation," notes Jan Ertner, who led the development team.

The Solus imbues a clean, sharp and chunky form factor with just enough character to charm rather than chill. It was no accident. Quad enlisted the help of Rodney Mead, the man responsible for the styling of many classic products from the brand in the seventies, eighties and nineties, to brainstorm design concepts.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Quad Artera Solus

PRICE
£1,500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
One-box system

WEIGHT
11.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
320 x 105 x 320mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 75W RMS (8ohm)
- Slot-loading CD transport
- AptX Bluetooth streaming
- Digital inputs: 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB-A; 1x USB-B
- Digital outputs: 1x coaxial; 1x optical
- Analogue inputs: 2x RCA; 2x balanced XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
quad-hifi.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 434

The structure is weighty and feels reassuringly rugged – exactly as intended for resisting resonance and vibration. Face-on, the main features are the loading slot for CDs and, to its left, a circular OLED display that doubles as a touch-sensitive pad for activating play/pause and scrolling through the input options. That's about it save for a 6.35mm headphone jack (fed from a dedicated headphone amp circuit), standby button and an impressively large remote with annoyingly small buttons and labels.

The heart of the Artera Solus is the ESS ES9018 32-bit, eight-channel hybrid multi-bit Delta-Sigma DAC. It provides support for PCM data up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD64/128/256. Connectivity is comprehensive, with doubled up optical, coaxial digital inputs plus another two RCA phono line-level analogue ins and a single USB-B for linking a PC or laptop available. A USB-A port is on hand for firmware updates. Outputs comprise balanced XLR or RCA pre-outs for harnessing a more muscular power amp (most obviously the Current Dumping Artera Stereo), and a choice of coaxial or optical connections should you want to hook up an external DAC.

If so, it would need to be pretty special. The on-board ESS chip is about as sophisticated as they come



ONE-BOX SYSTEM

domain, outputting directly to the dual-mono Class AB power amp section. But if the claimed 75W per channel into 8ohm looks a little modest on paper, it's backed up by a generous 15A of maximum current. Quad avows that awkward speaker loads simply aren't a problem and that the Solus even drives its own demanding electrostatic speakers without breaking sweat.

Sound quality

Aiming to deliver a Quad-level audiophile message to a broad audience that goes all the way from hardcore to Habitat, the Artera Solus spends time both substituting for the Cambridge Audio CXC CD transport (HFC 401), Chord Electronics Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428) and ATC CA-2/P1 pre-power amp combo (HFC 387) in my reference system, driving a pair of Audiovector QR 1 standmounts (HFC 418) on a sturdy sixties Danish coffee table in my bedroom – a task most recently undertaken by KEF's LS50 Wireless system (p54). A FiiO X3 Mk 2 DAP is also on hand to inject a little hi-res file goodness to the respective DACs in both setups.

I feel compelled to cut to the chase. Even by Quad's consistently high standards, the Artera Solus is almost unfeasibly talented. Responsible for a spell of open-mouthed amazement, it gives my reference system a very hard time indeed and goes on to produce the best sound I've yet heard in my bedroom, edging out the KEF LS50 Wireless in all respects bar broad dispersion stereo and out-and-out loudness. To put that in perspective, the £1,500 Artera Solus costs £350 less than my reference system's Chord DAC. And even when teamed with the classy Audiovector standmounts, the £2,250 total outlay is only £250 more than the active KEFs, for which you'd have to buy a transport if you wanted to be able to play CDs.

For the reference system acid test, Dynaudio's cracking £2,500 Special Forty standmount (see p45) serves both sets of electronics. It's an easy enough speaker to drive and one with great bass that really comes alive with a quality front end.

The opening scribbles on my notepad for the Artera Solus read thus: immediacy and presence, weight and body, scale and authority. And this after long-term familiarity with a system toting a state-of-the-art DAC and a famously fast and grippy power amp with twice the Artera's power. Moreover, and spookily apt given the lyric of the first CD into the slot, the Quad's portrayal of Bruno

Mars' terrifically bouncy *Finesse* really is "dripping in finesse", pulling off the hardest trick of successfully separating the high-energy impetus of the track with its ballooning bass and staccato drum pattern from the fine inner detail and complex, layered textures. Returning to the reference system the sense of discrimination is subtly stronger, the drum strikes fractionally crisper and there's a little more air and dimensionality to the soundstage. But power and bass quality seem no different and, tonally, the Quad sounds slightly sweeter and warmer.

With the slow-burning beauty of the *adagio* movement from Rachmaninov's *Symphony No.2 in E minor* (on Decca, with Vladimir Ashkenazy conducting the Concertgebouw Orchestra), the Artera's richer balance really pays off, giving the opening section's gently sighing violins and melody-weaving clarinet a delicacy and depth that leaves the reference seeming slightly analytical – certainly less swoony and romantic, despite its greater acuity and resolution. It's much the same story with hi-res files. Barb Jungr's 24/96 FLAC recording of Bruce Springsteen's *Long Walk Home* sounds fluent and full bodied with a warm, natural balance, although not quite able to match the reference system's forensic levels of resolution, alacrity, and finely graded dynamic shading. As for Bluetooth streaming, it's about as good as it gets: listenable and stable, but altogether softer and less dynamic than playing a CD or listening to a hi-res file.

Conclusion

It may lack wi-fi streaming for the moment, but in all other respects, the Artera Solus is a tremendous one-box system and an absolute steal given the price. It not only looks and feels far more expensive than it is, it sounds it too and so deserves a fine pair of speakers to show what it's really capable of. **DV**

and Quad's implementation offers a choice of four filter settings: Fast, Smooth, Narrow and Wide, with Fast being the default setting by dint of its optimum transient performance, though filter allocation descriptions can be a little arbitrary so it's worth experimenting. The slot-loading CD transport mechanism and attendant electronics play their part in allowing the DAC to do its best work, buffering the data from the disc before feeding

Even by Quad's high standards, the Artera Solus is unfeasibly talented

it asynchronously (minimising jitter in the process) to the DAC board.

Given a higher price ceiling, greater casework space and an ideal world, Quad would probably have liked to use its Current Dumping tech for the power amp section of the Artera Solus. That wasn't to be, but the company's engineers certainly don't seem to have stinted on an alternative. To be expected, the Artera Solus' pre and power amp sections are minimalist in design and use high-quality components linked by short, direct signal paths. Volume is digitally controlled in the analogue

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



LIKE: Compact design; build quality; rich and powerful sound

DISLIKE: No wi-fi streaming... yet

WE SAY: Quite simply one of the most desirable one-box systems we've encountered

OVERALL





Novafidelity X45

As a maker of digital hubs with audiophile sensibilities, Novafidelity's X45 all-in-one really is a complete do-it-all solution

It's sometimes difficult to fathom the best way of combining digital media libraries into one central location. Looking at the different kinds of one-box solutions on the market today, it's clear that many companies have been pondering the same problem, with each introducing their own take to tackle this modern way of accessing our favourite music as effortlessly as possible. Novafidelity – established in 2003 and previously known as Cocktail Audio in the UK, is now distributed by SCV Distribution – and has a growing reputation for turning computer-based sound technology into user-friendly audiophile products. The X45 is its latest and is described by the company as a reference

streamer and DAC. It builds on the now discontinued X40 (HFC 399), and is fitted with a faster Dual Core ARM Cortex A9 processor with Dual ESS ES9018K2M Sabre 32 Reference DAC chips. It adds support for MQA and is Roon ready as well as providing access to Napster, Qobuz, Tidal and Deezer streaming services. The review unit is fitted with a 4TB HDD, which is enough for around 5,200 CDs stored in WAV format. As an aftermarket option, formatted and installed HDDs start from £140 for a 2.5in SATA drive up to 2TB, as well as a 3.5in drive up to 8TB supported via the storage bay at the rear. Quieter 2.5in SDDs up to 2TB are also supported and are usually associated with faster read/write speeds and long-term reliability.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Novafidelity X45
PRICE
£2,195
ORIGIN
South Korea
TYPE
Music server, ripper, streamer and DAC
WEIGHT
7.8kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
441 x 100 x 330mm
FEATURES
• Up to 8TB HDD storage
• 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256-capable DAC
• Digital inputs: 1x optical; 1x coaxial; 1x AES/EBU; USB-B
• Analogue inputs: 1x RCAs; 1x 3.5mm jack
• MM phono stage
DISTRIBUTOR
SCV Distribution
TELEPHONE
03301222500
WEBSITE
scvdistribution.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 441

The X45 rips CDs and supports a comprehensive range of file types including: WAV, FLAC, ALAC, AIFF, AIF, AAC, M4A, MP3, WMA, CAF, Ogg Vorbis, PCM, M3U and PLS. HD WAV and FLAC files are supported up to 24-bit/192kHz, with DXD up to 24-bit/352.8kHz and DSD256. Build quality is impressive and the thick aluminium fascia finished in silver looks very smart. It's home to the on/standby button, volume/mute, 6.35mm headphone socket, 3.5mm aux input, slot-loading CD mechanism, USB port and a large 178mm LCD TFT colour display (1,024 x 600 pixels). Disappointingly, the impressive-looking screen isn't actually touch sensitive – something that I quickly establish as I prod at the icons – and a further rotary control along with four buttons provides front-panel navigation of the system's comprehensive onboard menus. Any disappointment at the lack of touchscreen is quickly overcome by downloading the system's Novatron Music X app – freely available to iOS and Android devices – to my iPad, which swiftly puts me in control of the X45 from the comfort of my sofa. It's a slick app that pretty quickly sees the network-connected unit – although it says it's connected to a Cocktail Audio X45 as this is branding for territories outside of the UK.



Radio's streaming service or hi-res content played from a networked drive, it has plenty of punch and detail to make me sit up and listen.

I start things slow and scan the Melco library for something gentle and easy going, settling on *I Want Your Love* from the album *C'est Chic* in FLAC 24/192 form and am instantly impressed. A late-seventies recording with a laidback funk/disco groove, there's plenty of mid-frequency presence and detail in the upper registers. It might not be the richest recording from the disco era and bass can seem a bit lacking at times, but the X45 scythes through the beat throwing out Nile Rodgers' infectious guitar hooks with layers of texture

Ripped music has a lovely flow that closely matches the delivery from a CD

while the tubular bells and Diva Gray's lead vocal are presented confidently in a finely detailed manner that expertly shows off the immaculately recorded Chic hit.

A rip of Newton Faulkner's *Hand Built By Robots* takes around six minutes to complete in WAV format at the highest quality – there are lesser-quality settings and alternative format options to reduce file size and save on disk space, should you so wish. The rip appears quickly in the library with all the disc's metadata retrieved from the Gracenote database service (if the license is activated) or Freedb.

As I listen back, there's no discernible difference between the original CD and the ripped version of the album, and the guitar-thumping on *To The Light* is brimming with life and energy. *Teardrop* is assured and the track has a lovely flow that closely matches the kind of delivery you get from a dedicated CD transport. The track's rhythmic timing feels genuinely bang on, but the X45's killer trick is the magical way it conveys the deepest bass notes towards the end of the song, which strips out none of their impressive gravitas following the ripping process.

If you're familiar with the excellent navigational abilities from streaming services like Qobuz and Tidal, the Novatron app will take some getting used to as it goes about doing and displaying things its own way. It's a bit of a learning curve, but the sound remains unaffected. *Do You Wanna Dance* by Cosha – a 16/44.1 stream

via Tidal – is a perfect example of how good the X45 is at bringing music to life, showcasing nuances in this multi-layered production that expertly picks out the myriad textures and recording qualities buried on the multiple music samples of varying qualities within the track. This spotlight into a recording is what lossless and hi-res music streaming are all about, and despite the one-box solution's complexities it has audiophile streaming credentials.

The addition of a moving-magnet phono stage is a pleasant surprise, too. It won't worry dedicated designs, but is generally quiet and has a refined quality to its presentation and is useful for digitising vinyl to the built-in hard drive.

Although ripping and digitising a vinyl collection is a feature that's a little bit lost on me, the X45 handles the process effectively. It might be a little crude and isn't mentioned in the comprehensive instruction booklet that I can find, but it's effective and demonstrates remarkably similar characteristics to the original LP once the recorded file is located in the library using the Browser option.

Conclusion

There's no denying that this is a remarkably capable and flexible unit. There once was a time when do-it-all music solutions would have meant certain compromises, usually in terms of sound quality, but the X45 sacrifices nothing.

It's got a lot to offer if your setup is up to making the most of the impressive performance. Undoubtedly you're going to have to spend some time getting to grips with the vast capabilities, and the more time I spend with it, the more I respect its idiosyncrasies and it rewards with extended use. It's easily the most complete and futureproof digital music source I've spent time with, and so comes highly recommended. **LD**

HI-FIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: High specs; flexible features; good quality sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Operational quirks; instruction booklet; display screen

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A quirky but truly outstanding digital music hub with top-notch sound

FEATURES



OVERALL



A button-festooned traditional remote control is supplied, which I put to one side while I first get to grips with the neatly presented app. I'm surprised to see that the app screen can even mimic the layout of the supplied bulky remote control via a tab option on the main menu screen, which is more useful than I first imagine as I begin to unravel the full complexity of the system.

Despite its frankly somewhat daunting capabilities, setup is straightforward and I connect the unit via Ethernet to my home network – wireless connectivity is available via an add-on wi-fi dongle that costs £35 and plugs into a USB 3.0 host port on the back panel. Navigating through the comprehensive menus using the app is glitch-free and the X45 quickly accesses its onboard music preinstalled for this review, as well as my own networked content stored on a Melco N1ZH/2 (HFC 438).

Sound quality

Connecting the X45 to a Musical Fidelity M6 500i integrated amplifier, things immediately get off to a good start. The slick music library accesses tracks from the networked Melco just as quickly as from its own internal HDD storage, and the sound is instantly appealing. Whether it's a radio station from Airable Internet



VGP
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WINNER
AWARD
2018
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FI-50M NCF

FI-E50 NCF



FI-UK1363 NCF

NCF Series

Nano Crystal² Formula - Nano Crystalline, Ceramic and Carbon Powder Incorporated into selected Furutech products, NCF features a special crystalline material that has two 'active' properties. First, it generates negative ions that eliminate static. Second, it converts thermal energy into far infrared. Furutech combines this remarkable material with nano-sized ceramic particles and carbon powder for their additional 'piezoelectric effect' damping properties. The resulting Nano Crystal² Formula is the ultimate electrical and mechanical damping material. Created by Furutech, it is found exclusively in Furutech products

AWARD
2017
AWARD
2016
Special Prix

Refinement Has a New Name... Furutech's Top-of-the-Line Flux Cable series



Nanoflux-NCF UK



Speakerflux

Auralic

Aries Mini

REPRESENTING THE FIRST

rung on the Auralic ladder, the Aries Mini can stream DSD files or decode MQA and is also fitted with a USB digital out, allowing it to send audio to a USB DAC. It's well specified as a player too, with an ESS ES9018K2M DAC outputting via its single-ended RCA stereo out.

A drive bay on its underside allows it to be both a player and renderer. The chassis is well finished, available in black or white and there is also the option of boosting performance by making use of the optional linear power supply (£250).

Sound quality

The Aries Mini quickly reveals itself to be a very fine performer. Its handling of the strings in Daft Punk's *Adagio For TRON* is unforced, natural and supplies the detail of the individual instruments without losing

the overall balance and scale of the orchestra as a whole. The frequency response feels like it has been delivered in a very even-handed way with no undue prominence given to any particular part. This is also the case with Massive Attack's *Dissolved Girl*, doing a fine job of laying Sarah Jay Hawley's vocals on top of the deep electronic bass. The absolute depth on offer might not be the deepest, but the control definition and detail that it possesses is extremely impressive.

With the lighter and tonally sweeter *Sinner In The Sea* by Calexico, the Auralic is still capable of putting in a pretty decent performance. There is a slightly matter of fact edge to the presentation, which means that the Aries Mini isn't quite as sweet as some of the other players on the market, but the effortless sense of rhythm and three dimensionality that it weaves into the music goes a long way



towards compensating for this. With the superb recording of The Roy Hargrove Quintet's *Mr Clean*, it is in its element. The trumpet sounds tangibly real and leaps out of the recording in a way that some more expensive drivers can struggle to replicate.

Additional testing with hi-res material shows the Aries to maintain these excellent playback qualities with larger file types. A test with the 24/88.2 download of Dead Can Dance's *Song Of The Stars* is a superb demonstration of timing, tonality and detail, and the Auralic is unfazed by any of the formats or sample rates that are thrown its way. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Aries Mini

PRICE
£449

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic

WEBSITE
auralic.com

REVIEWED
HFC 442

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Naim

Uniti Core

PART OF NAIM'S Uniti range, the Uniti Core also acts as the server option for its Classic series of network music streamers. One critical aspect that's different to rivals is that there's no hard drive. Customers can choose the type and capacity to suit their needs and the 1TB SSD fitted to our review sample costs an additional £240.

It handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files and can be made available via Ethernet to other devices on the same network or via S/PDIF so it can be connected directly to a DAC. Rather unusually, this converts DSD files to 176.4kHz PCM to allow them to be played. Around the front, there is a CD mechanism for ripping to WAV or FLAC with tagging or to playback a CD. A test of the ripper identifies the relatively obscure test disc correctly and applies durable tags and metadata.

If you want to use the Unity Core as a direct playback device, you'll need Naim's dedicated free app, which is stable and reliable on both Android and iOS devices.

Sound quality

Presentation on the Lightning app doesn't impart any of the company's more standard rhythmic behaviour. There is no sense of any noise floor and Emily Barker's vocals in *Letters* reveal a tangible sense of naturalness and presence that doesn't come at the expense of their relationship with the supporting instrumentation. This same balance is apparent with Dead Can Dance's *Black Sun* and the Naim does a fine job of capturing the potency and flow of the track. This fluency is present on Depeche Mode's *Personal Jesus* and the Core has no trouble delivering a second hi-res stream to a different device at the same time.



Switching to the coaxial output into a Chord Electronics Hugo 2, the Core makes an instant stable connection. In keeping with its network showing, the Naim is very much the understated party in the partnership. It simply provides the Chord with a noise and interference-free signal on which to work its decoding magic. Conversion of DSD to PCM works seamlessly and interestingly, much of the energetic sweetness of *Personal Jesus* over and above the normal PCM recording seems to be retained at the same time. There are also no issues with track gaps or changes to the sample rate with playback staying entirely interruption-free throughout. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Uniti Core

PRICE
From £1,899

TELEPHONE
01722 426600

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 438

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★



Auralic Aries G1

Hoping to capture a wider audience, Auralic unveils a lower-cost version of its impressive Aries G2. All you need is your own DAC...

Sacrificing some of the features of Auralic's high-end Aries G2 (overleaf), the G1 comes in at less than half the price of the flagship model. The principle is the same, and this is a streaming transport that focuses on the business of accessing your digital music files on a home or external server and presenting them to an onboard DAC via its digital output connectivity. For added flexibility, one of those connections is a USB-A port for hook-up to a USB DAC without the need for a driver, while there's also a trio of optical, coaxial and AES outputs. Auralic's Lightning Link 18Gbps digital hookup is absent and the G1 can't facilitate an internally mounted hard drive, although you can still attach an external one directly via USB.

Like other Auralic products, it uses Lightning Sever software, changing the relationship between your storage and streamer – it caches the music library on the player and app and effectively reduces the role of your NAS to pure storage – and is an impressively slick user experience in the process. Once it has assembled the database, it is consistently stable with impressive integration of Tidal and Qobuz – encompassing the hi-res sections of both while additionally offering Spotify as a convenience option.

The only issue with Lightning is that it remains iOS-only. Happily, there is a workaround as the Aries G1 can be used with Roon, which has both an iOS and Android control app. This relies on you being a Roon subscriber, but it's a useful option if you are.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Aries G1
PRICE
£1,899
ORIGIN
North America
TYPE
Network streaming transport
WEIGHT
7.2kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 80 x 320mm
FEATURES
• Digital outputs:
1x USB-A; 1x AES;
1x coaxial; 1x optical
• AirPlay; Bluetooth
wireless
• Supports sample
rates up to
32-bit/768kHz
PCM and DSD512
• Spotify Connect
Tidal, Qobuz
music streaming;
internet radio
• Roon compatible
DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic
WEBSITE
auralic.com
REVIEWED
HFC 441

Internally, the Aries is built around the same second-generation version of the company's 'Tesla' platform as the G2 and includes 1GB of RAM. This is partnered with a full-colour display that can show the album cover, track title (but not album title), time elapsed and track number. This is not a touchscreen, and physical control comes via a series of buttons on the front panel that Auralic has helpfully picked out in a different colour to the fascia, making them easy to identify. Like other Auralic products, the Lightning DS app really takes the strain in setup terms and allows for considerable adjustment as to how the Aries G1 goes about playback.

The casework is quite different to its big brother and is built from smaller sections rather than the large single-piece milled unit of the G2, and it also does without the vibration controlling feet. The USB port doesn't have quite the same level of galvanic isolation. Viewed in isolation, though, the Aries G1 feels almost as solid as the G2 and when you consider the lower price, it feels equal to pretty much any rival. It's not without some minor annoyances, though. The lip over the inputs makes connection harder than it needs to be.

As a transport as opposed to a complete streamer, the performance of the Aries G1 is largely defined by the DAC it's connected to, but that



running into a Naim Supernait 2 integrated amplifier and Neat Momentum 4i floorstanding loudspeaker, the Auralic does a very decent job of being a facilitator rather than a sonic influencer. The Hugo 2 is effectively left to get on with creating the unforced window into whatever you choose to play on it. The punchy, staccato vocals of Marina Diamandis in *Obsessions* are delivered with every syllable perfectly defined and distinct from the looped vocal effect behind it.

As a duo, the Auralic and Chord are the notional ideal of a window on the music. With the Kairos Quartet's *Reunion*, the piano at the opening of the track is completely unforced, free

The Aries does a very decent job of being a facilitator rather than a sonic influencer

from any sense of processing or that curiously synthetic quality that can bedevil some digital sources. Instead, there's a genuine sense of a big instrument in a space that you can relate to along with the partnering instruments. As a pairing for less than the price of an Aries G2 on its own, this makes for a very compelling concept.

Connecting the Aries G1 to an Arcam SA20 integrated amplifier (HFC 439) via a coaxial connection sees the presentation shift effortlessly to reflect the Arcam's slightly different character. The refinement and slight emphasis on the midrange are easy to discern in the performance with the 24/96 download of Massive Attack's *Hymn Of The Big Wheel*. This combination is slightly softer and more beguiling than the results garnered with the Chord, although a little less dynamic at the same time. It does suggest that connecting the Aries directly to a range of integrated amplifiers to form a slightly different take on the classic

two-box source and amplifier system, works extremely well.

One of the reasons this is the case is down to a highly useful feature that's hidden away in the setup menu. If you are using the legacy connections, you can set maximum values for the sample rates it will send. If you have something fairly up to date, this can be as simple as ensuring that DSD is converted to PCM, but if you do something more radical like connect a more elderly DAC, it allows you to choose anything from your music collection content in the knowledge that you'll hear music output at a bit-depth and sampling frequency that the DAC is able to handle.

Auralic's implementation of Tidal and Qobuz is partitioned from your own music library – unlike Roon it doesn't integrate the two together into a single flow of content – but sonically, the performance with on-demand material is extremely impressive.

A Tidal Master of Twin Shadow's *Caer* is dynamic and very immediate, but comes combined with a wonderfully sweet and refined top end that is as apparent via the Chord as it is with the Arcam. Interestingly, Auralic feels that its own implementation of Tidal sounds better than with the same material played via the Roon. This isn't something I can test here, but there's no doubt that Auralic's method sounds quite superb.

Conclusion

The main issue for Auralic is that from the perspective of using it with a DAC from a different manufacturer, the logic of spending twice as much on the G2 looks less clear following my time with the Aries G1. It is, after all, a beautifully realised streaming platform that delivers the Auralic experience to a variety of DACs at an attractive price. If you have a DAC, this is the most transparent way to add network music streaming to your system and leads the way in the field. **ES**

isn't to say that it can't spring a few surprises of its own.

Sound quality

Most significant is the performance advantage of letting it assemble its own cache and database via Lightning DS. Through two different DACs, there is a small but perceivable improvement to the 16/44.1 FLAC file of Wild Beasts *Boy King* when listened via the Lightning server, making it worthwhile opting to allow it to assemble the database for you.

With this done and the G1 connected via USB port to a Chord Electronics Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 425) and then



Lightning DS may support iOS devices only, but offers a faultless control experience

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Flexibility; excellent features; transparent sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: No Android app; slightly obscured rear connections

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Superb streaming front end that works beautifully with whatever you choose to connect to it

FEATURES



OVERALL



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**Hi-Fi
Choice**
RECOMMENDED

Auralic Aries G2

A streaming transport that's dependent on users adding an external DAC to route music from it to a hi-fi, the Aries G2 has a USB-A port to ensure driverless configuration. Unlike the Aries G1 overleaf, it is fitted with Lightning Link, which is a bi-directional 18Gbps digital hookup that uses an HDMI connection. This means that add-on G2 components – Vega, Sirius and Leo – have the means to handle all sorts of extraordinary hi-res files and also to lock the components together and suppress jitter – a standard criticism of the two-box approach. For those music streaming fans that aren't quite on the bleeding edge of technology, the Aries G2 is also fitted with AES/EBU, coaxial and Toslink digital outputs that cater for transmission of PCM files at up to 24-bit/192kHz.

These legacy connections access the company's Tesla streaming platform that is capable of handling files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512. These files can be accessed over wired and wireless network connections, but the G2 also has an internal bay for a 2.5in hard drive. This allows it to become a self-contained server. You can additionally attach a hard drive externally via a dedicated USB port.

Sound quality

Like the G1, the G2's performance is shaped by the DAC you connect it to, but within that statement are some caveats that largely come out in favour of the Auralic. The first is that

across the three devices I use for listening – Chord Electronics Hugo 2 (HFC 428) for USB, a Naim ND5 XS (HFC 352) via optical and a Audio Note DAC 1.1 on the coaxial input – the connections are all silent and extremely stable, with no clicks and pops or interruptions to playback.

The Hugo 2 playing a 24/88.2 download of Lynyrd Skynyrd's *I Need You* is very impressive. The music rises from an utterly silent background and there is an almost analogue warmth to the vocals. DSD is also transferred without issue and a DSD64 download of Depeche Mode's *Clean* is relayed with real potency and depth.

The character of the performance is largely defined by the DAC and changing to the more forceful and tonally darker Naim ND5 XS shows this to good effect. The muscularity of the Naim with a 24/48 download of Yossou N'Dour and Peter Gabriel performing *In Your Eyes* has an effortlessly deep and controlled bass. The Naim's innate rhythmic ability is unaffected by receiving the signal from the Aries G2, which suggests that while Auralic might have some very clever jitter reduction technology in the pipeline, the performance of the unit is already very good.

With the Audio Note – which is radically different in its presentation – the results are no less impressive. A 16/44.1 rip of Martha Tilston's *Stags Bellow* is sublime. Her unique tone and singing style is presented with startling clarity and there is an immediacy and realism to the

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Aries G2

PRICE
£3,899

ORIGIN
North America

TYPE
Network streaming transport

WEIGHT
7.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 80 x 320mm

FEATURES

- Digital outputs: 1x Lightning Link; 1x USB-A; 1x AES; 1x coaxial; 1x optical
- AirPlay; aptX Bluetooth wireless
- Tidal and Qobuz music streaming services; internet radio
- Internal bay for add-on HDD

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic

WEBSITE
auralic.com

REVIEWED
HFC 431

performance that draws you into the music in a way that the more sophisticated DACs sometimes struggle to achieve. The Audio Note shows up an unusual feature of the Auralic that is very useful in these circumstances. If you enter the IP address of the Aries G2 into a computer on the same network, you can limit the maximum sample rate to a fixed value that the DAC can handle – in this case 44.1kHz. Material at higher sample rates will be down sampled to work at this rate and it means that your whole library can be listened to even if the DAC can't normally handle some of the files it contains.

Conclusion

What the Aries G2 does is take every aspect of network audio that the brand has been perfecting with its previous products and places all of its know-how into a seriously accomplished piece of hardware. The high price for what is in effect half a streamer won't appeal to everyone, but as the basis for an ultra-high performance, flexible and easy to use network audio front end, the Aries G2 really does need to be on any worthwhile audition list. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Capable and stable streaming platform; build and spec

DISLIKE: Front panel user interface takes some getting used to

WE SAY: A seriously accomplished streaming front end with outstanding capabilities

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Cambridge Audio CXN V2

Looking at the latest version of the CXN it's not easy to spot any significant updates from the original. So, what's changed? In a nutshell: a faster, more powerful processor for a "smoother user experience", MPEG-DASH and HTTP Live Streaming HLS compatibility to enable high-quality internet radio streams (many BBC stations at up to 320kbps) and greater playback control via the ability to 'seek' through a track played over UPnP, USB or Spotify Connect.

It's a pity on-board Bluetooth hasn't been folded into the deal. If you want it, you'll need the USB BT100 aptX module as before (£70). Carried over from the original are the dual Wolfson WM8740 24-bit DACs, enabling all digital inputs to play hi-res files up to 24-bit/192kHz, though Anagram Technologies' second-gen Adaptive Time Filter (ATF2) then up-samples to 24-bit/384kHz.

As before, Spotify Connect and AirPlay are built in and the CXN V2 also supports Napster, BBC iPlayer Radio, Aupeol! Pandora and Rhapsody. External connectivity is comprehensive with NAS drive and UPnP compatibility, coaxial and optical digital inputs and, via the USB slot on the rear panel, support for DSD64 using the DoP protocol rather than in native form. There are four USB ports in all. The

one on the front is for streaming with a memory stick while, round the back, there are sockets for the Bluetooth module and wi-fi dongle plus an asynchronous Type-B input, claimed to put the bite on jitter if files are stored on your computer's hard drive. All the usual formats are supported including ALAC, WAV, FLAC, AIFF, WMA, MP3, AAC, HE AAC, AAC+ and OGG Vorbis. Outputs are balanced XLR (ideal for linking to a CX series integrated amp) or unbalanced RCA and you can connect to your router with an Ethernet cable or using the supplied wi-fi dongle.

Sound quality

The CXN V2's streaming skills are mighty impressive, hi-res or not. The overarching presentation is smooth, full bodied, tonally rich and finely textured, but – acting as a front-end to my ATC P1 power amp (HFC 397) driving Bowers & Wilkins' 705 S2 standmount (HFC 430) – it knows how to boogie. And, when required to step it up, knock it clean out of the stadium. Thirty Seconds To Mars' juggernaut, *Walk On Water*, at 24/96, has true wall-of-sound scale, intensity and sheer woofer-wobbling, low-end wallop. Hard not to smile.

Anyone that wanted to sell the sonic advantages of top-notch streaming to a sceptic like me could do a lot worse than play Joni Mitchell's 2000 version

of *Both Sides Now*, which even at 16/44.1 sounds velvety and voluptuous, Joni's vocal mellow and smoky. Even so, the CXN V2 can't get away with this charm offensive scot-free. For only a £100 more, the click-fit team-up of Chord Electronics' Poly wireless network module (HFC 431) with the Mojo DAC (HFC 423) delivers a streaming skillset that, while far from as operationally suave and satisfying as the CXN V2's, posts a scorching standard when it comes to sound quality. For all the CXN V2's muscular drive, rich tonality, tidy timing and natural detail, the Chord combo is more transparent and insightful with a firmer grasp of rhythm, greater dynamic reach and finesse and an organic sense of ebb and flow.

Conclusion

That said, the Chord combo's small size requires a certain mindset for operational harmony as part of a full-sized system. This is where the CXN V2 more than excels. It's a lovely slice of full-width design that makes navigating and accessing multiple sources at speed as complicated as falling off a log and whenever you switch it on, it simply sounds fab. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge Audio CXN V2

PRICE
£800

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Network music player/DAC/digital preamp

WEIGHT
3.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 85 x 305mm

FEATURES
• 24-bit/384kHz and DSD64-capable DAC
• Wi-fi and Ethernet streaming up to
• Apple AirPlay
• Digital inputs: 1x USB Type-B; 2x USB Type-A; 1x coaxial; 1x optical
• Outputs: 1x RCA; 1x XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio Partnership Plc.

TELEPHONE
0207 9402200

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 437

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Muscular, natural sound; a dream to use; style and build

DISLIKE: Bluetooth extra; nothing else at the price

WE SAY: A talented streamer/digital preamp/DAC that's even better to use and fine value



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NETWORK PLAYER



Pioneer N-70AE

Befitting a model being at the top of its streaming tree, Pioneer has ensured that the N-70AE wants for nothing in specification terms. The decoding platform is built around a streaming solution that works via wired and wireless connections and is compatible with 24-bit/192kHz PCM and up to DSD256. Decoding is handled by a pair of ESS Sabre 9016 DACs and runs in dual mono and fully balanced configuration, available to coaxial, optical and USB Type-B digital inputs. The USB betters the streaming section and is 32-bit/384kHz capable and there are coaxial and optical digital outputs as well as analogue RCA and XLR.

As well as network content, the N-70AE is able to natively access Tidal, Deezer and Spotify alongside internet radio services. If you want to listen to a streaming service beyond those already on board, there's AirPlay and Chromecast support while Flare Connect allows Pioneer – as well as components from sister brand Onkyo – to work together in a multi-room setup. DTS Play-Fi is also on board, but uses Pioneer's own dedicated app available for iOS and Android. It can also read content from USB sticks and drives directly. A dedicated headphone amplifier complete with its own volume control is also included on the front panel.

The only notable omissions are Bluetooth wireless connectivity and the ability to operate as a preamp – although given that Pioneer makes

neither power amps nor Bluetooth speakers, this doesn't come as too much of a surprise.

Sound quality

Connected to a Melco N1A (HFC 397) NAS drive via Ethernet and a Naim Supernait 2 integrated amplifier via RCA, the N-70AE's sound mirrors its appearance. The 16/44.1 rips of the slowly building *Neighbourhood #1 (Tunnels)* by Arcade Fire sounds clean and effortlessly neutral. What is particularly impressive is that this calm neutrality doesn't tip over into sounding sterile. Win Butler's vocals display all the emotion and richness that they should and there is an almost analogue quality to the way that the piece flows.

Where it leaves all but the most top-notch analogue equipment standing is the bass response. The most notable aspect of this is not the absolute depth on display – although it is seismic – but more the texture, detail and control from the lower midband down. The iconic opening bass riff of Nirvana's *Come As You Are* has weight, texture and a realism that is one of a number of threads that the N-70AE effortlessly ties together to form a believable performance.

This is helped in no small way by there being a consistent sense of three dimensionality to the way it delivers material. Ali Farka Touré's superb guitar work in *Savane* hangs in free space, divorced from either loudspeaker and locked slap bang in the middle. There is also a real

perception of depth to the sound. This ability is completely unaffected by the scale of what you play on it and even the full blown 24/96 download of Max Richter's interpretation of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* doesn't faze the N-70AE, with the full orchestra being beautifully rendered.

The only issue isn't a sonic one. Navigation on the app can be slow and during Tidal periodically stops altogether. Its flexibility partially comes to its rescue here. Using it as a USB DAC with the Melco via a generic third-party app is stable and Tidal via AirPlay is also reliable, which neatly circumnavigates any stability issues. The problem is that the N-70AE is heading into a price point where some rivals don't suffer from the same issues.

Conclusion

Superbly specified, the N-70AE delivers a deeply impressive performance with both standard-definition and hi-res material, considering its price. Depending on how sensitive to software you are, you might find that it just misses the mark when it comes to operation, but for many this will be just too strong a proposition to resist. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pioneer N-70AE

PRICE
£1,200

ORIGIN
Japan/Vietnam

TYPE
Network music player/DAC

WEIGHT
11.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 121 x 364mm

FEATURES
• 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256-capable DAC
• Wi-fi and Ethernet streaming
• Digital inputs: 1x USB-B; 1x coaxial; 1x optical
• Digital outputs: 1x coaxial; 1x optical
• Integrated Tidal, Spotify and Deezer support

DISTRIBUTOR
Pioneer & Onkyo Europe GmbH

WEBSITE
pioneer-audiovisual.eu/uk

REVIEWED
HFC 433

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Refined, accurate and powerful sound; excellent facilities and build

DISLIKE: Clunky interface; fractional lack of excitement

WE SAY: Well specified streamer with great all-round performance, but some app issues

Audio-Technica

ATH-ADX5000

HAND ASSEMBLED IN Audio-Technica's production facility in Tokyo, the ATH-ADX5000 represents a significant jump in cost over any other model in its range. It's a full-size, over-ear open-back design built around enclosures that mount a 58mm dynamic driver, with a claimed frequency response of 5Hz to 50kHz. Unlike previous designs, the '3D Wing support' system has been dispensed with and a more straightforward padded headband is employed. You also get a hard carry case and a detachable 3m cable with A2DC connections.

Sound quality

The sound of the Audio-Technica is entirely at odds with its lightweight design. This is a big and potent-sounding headphone that has a weight and sense of scale at its disposal that allows it to handle

large and powerful recordings without any sign of strain. The 24/44 stream of Leftfield's *Bad Radio* is a thrillingly visceral experience. The bass is felt as much as heard and this is in itself a unique sensation because it is purely from the movement of air from the drivers while the chassis feels entirely inert. The upper frequencies are well integrated and there is a spaciousness to the sound that's easy to hear.

Importantly, this space isn't bought at the expense of soundstage and positioning. The lovely version of the *Raindrop Prelude* on Ólafur Arnalds' *The Chopin Project* in 24/96 shows this to excellent effect. The piano is located to the front of the listener (no mean feat when the drivers are actually on either side of your head) and effects in the recording are a perceptible distance from it. The piano sounds weighty and effortlessly



real with the decay of notes from struck keys being particularly well handled. There is a fine sense that this headphone imparts all the scale that is actually needed without overdoing things.

This is a supremely capable and accurate transducer that delivers some of the most utterly unfettered and open headphone listening I have experienced in a long time. This is an impressive high-end experience that audiophiles will appreciate. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio-Technica
ATH-ADX5000

PRICE
£1,990

TELEPHONE
0113 2771441

WEBSITE
eu.audio-technica.com

REVIEWED
HFC 435

OUR VERDICT



Bowers & Wilkins

PX

EMPLOYING BOTH

BLUETOOTH and active noise-cancellation the PX utilises 40mm drivers based on 2017's well-received £700 P9 Signature (HFC 421). It costs much less, which pitches it up against high-end noise-cancelling rivals such as the Bose QC35 (HFC 418).

The adjustable noise-cancellation has three different modes – Flight, Office and City – that allow different levels of background noise to filter through. Additional features include a motion sensor that will pause or play music when you take the PX off or pick it up again. The headphone upsamples the audio signal to a claimed 768kHz and B&W has also adopted aptX HD Bluetooth, which caters for up to 24-bit wireless streaming. Along with a standard 3.5mm audio cable for wired hook ups, it also includes a USB-C

connector and cable that can be used for charging and USB-Audio input.

Sound quality

I start with a wired connection and am impressed by the wide, expansive soundstage. A 24/96 stream of Enya's *The Humming* from Qobuz floats airily around my head while the slow, stately drumbeat adds a sense of drama. I'm also impressed when I switch over to Bluetooth and that sense of space and drama remains intact, with only a slight dip in volume indicating the changed connection. The PX digs deep too, successfully capturing the sinister, meandering bass line on *Prime Evil* by The Orb. However, that depth and drama recedes noticeably when listening to the same tracks via Spotify's 160kbps streaming – confirming there's only so much you can do with upsampling.



When it comes to noise cancelling, the Flight mode almost entirely blocks out the low rumble of engines in an aircraft cabin without affecting the sound quality, even when I listen to Kate Bush's delicate voice on *My Lagan Love*.

The sound quality in wired mode is extremely good, but the triumph of the PX is that it successfully maintains that clear, precise sound even with Bluetooth streaming and full-strength interference blocking. There's a new noise-cancelling kid on the block. **CJ**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins PX

PRICE
£329

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 431

OUR VERDICT



MrSpeakers

Voce

AS MRSPEAKERS' FLAGSHIP headphone, this electrostatic has been designed to deliver very high resolution and clarity with a large soundstage, neutral voicing and a bass output that extends deep into the subsonic region.

The supplied 2m cable is detachable using a small hex key and the ear pads are made of Italian Napa leather. They are an over-ear design, which is dictated by the large 88mm driver housed inside each cup. As with most electrostatics, the Voce is a completely open design, but despite this, the drivers are fully dust sealed and insulated against the elements. Also included with the Voce is a set of three 'tuning pads' with varying levels of attenuation in the top-end to allow you to adjust the tone of the headphone to suit your preferences, and simply slip into the earcups. The Voce is light to

wear at 330g and the earcups fit comfortably over my ears.

Sound quality

I kick off with Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 1* played by Vladimir Ashkenazy and the LSO. The results are completely believable, and the energy of the playing is beautifully conveyed. There is excellent image placement and clarity – not only of the piano, but the entire orchestra. The piano is perfectly positioned in front of the orchestra, which itself is spread evenly across the soundstage.

To check out MrSpeakers' claim that the large 88mm driver can pack a punch, next up is Stravinsky's *The Firebird Suite* by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. The Voce does a great job of conveying the power and fullness here and, as the piece progresses, the twittering of the strings is beautifully clear and delicate.



The techno-jazz of *Equipe 68* by Azymuth is a complete contrast and I am propelled by the energy of the performance. The bass is powerful and punchy and the drums and hi-hats are crisp, tight and engaging.

The Voce has a really good bass that is both tight and well extended. The top-end is crisp and also well extended. This is a great all-rounder that feels at home across a wide range of musical genres and can be worn comfortably for long listening periods. **NR**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
MrSpeakers Voce
PRICE
£2,600
TELEPHONE
01494 956558
WEBSITE
electromod.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 440

OUR VERDICT



Sennheiser

HD 820

SENNHEISER CLAIMS TO have cracked the shortcomings of closed-back designs with its Ring Radiator transducers, which are fitted with special Gorilla Glass covers. The concave glass reflects sound waves from the rear of the transducer to an absorber, which is said to minimise resonances. Combined with the 56mm driver, this results in a good enclosed volume, and the diaphragm should not be overly constrained.

The HD 820 is supplied in a wooden case and comes with three 3m silver-plated OFC cables fitted with gold-plated plugs. The one for unbalanced operation is terminated with a 6.35mm standard unbalanced stereo jack plug. The other two are balanced – one is terminated with a 4.4mm Pentaconn stereo jack plug and the other with an XLR-4 connector. The ends that connect to

the earcup are fitted with the same high-quality plug as on the company's HD 800 S over-ear, open-back offering (HFC 439).

Sound quality

Starting off with some jazz and *I Get A Kick Out Of You* by Clare Teal with the Syd Lawrence Orchestra, I am instantly wowed by the superb bass, which is incredibly tight, well controlled and extended. At the other end of the audio spectrum, the brushing on the drums is clear and crisp, and the brass section is strident, while vocals are nicely positioned within the soundstage.

The HD 820 appears to be very much at home with a full orchestra. A 1979 recording of Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien, Op. 49* performed by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra on the Telarc label is full and engagingly complex. The bass drum



that comes in towards the end of the track is scarily good and I almost jump when it starts and find myself totally immersed in the performance.

The HD 820 really delivers refined performances across a wide range of musical genres, but its bass is a particular strength. To deliver such tight, punchy and extended low frequencies with a closed-back design is an impressive achievement. It's certainly not cheap, but it is without doubt the finest sounding closed-back design I have ever auditioned. **NR**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sennheiser HD 820
PRICE
£1,999
TELEPHONE
0333 2408185
WEBSITE
en-uk.sennheiser.com
REVIEWED
HFC 442

OUR VERDICT





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Sennheiser

IE 800 S

UNUSUAL IN THE ranks of high-end in-ear headphones, the IE 800 S doesn't use balanced armature drivers, either singularly or in multiple driver arrangements. Instead, each enclosure has a single dynamic driver. This driver is 7mm and is designed to Sennheiser's Extra Wide Bandwidth (XWB), with a claimed response of 5Hz to 46kHz.

Relatively unusually for an in-ear at this price, the IE 800 S has captive cable attachments at the housing ends – something that leaves them potentially vulnerable to being snagged and damaged. To minimise the chances of this happening, Sennheiser provides a stress break point halfway down the cable to allow it to easily separate if snagged. The lower section is supplied in conventional 3.5mm and balanced 2.5 and 4.4mm connections. The in-ear is comfortable to wear for

long listening periods and unlike its predecessor, is available with Comply tips for the best seal in the ear canal.

Sound quality

Given some time to properly run in, the IE 800 S begins to show its outstanding ability. A 24/192 download of Jimmy Eat World's *Bleed American* is deceptive in its simplicity as the Sennheiser effortlessly unpicks the interplay between the bandmates and delivers the album with a spaciousness and depth that is truly extraordinary for an in-ear design. There are rivals (take a bow Noble, Shure, Final and Westone) that can match the frequency response of the IE 800 S, but the sheer coherence of it being produced from a single driver is what gives it the edge. With rhythmically complex material like Amadou & Mariam's *Filaou Bessame*, there is a precision and fundamental



rightness to the way that it follows the bassline that can make even very talented rivals seem decidedly heavy footed in comparison.

When you are willing to put the effort in and partner the IE 800 S with a decent source and high-quality material, it is spectacularly good. What sets it apart from rivals is that it demands so little of the wearer, making it possibly the best in-ear on the planet and a tremendous engineering achievement. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sennheiser IE 800 S

PRICE
£870

TELEPHONE
0333 2408185

WEBSITE
en-uk.sennheiser.com

REVIEWED
HFC 434

OUR VERDICT



1More

Triple Driver BT

1MORE HAS NEATLY sidestepped the limitations of Bluetooth with the ability to receive hi-res audio in the form of Sony's LDAC codec (up to 990kbps) and Apple's AAC (up to 250kbps). In the box you get the headphone, a USB Type-A-to-USB Type-C cable for charging, nine sets of ear tips in foam and silicone, plus a bag for storage. The control unit on the left end of the neck band has volume, play/pause and the power button, as well as a microphone.

Sound quality

In terms of sound quality, the Triple Driver BT delivers a highly impressive performance with near-perfect bass levels, plenty of midrange detail and almost equally sumptuous highs. My listening test tracks have a slight warmer tone that's enjoyable. The 'warmth' is most prevalent in acoustic tracks

including John Legend's *All Of Me*, where the piano has a rich but authentic sound. Tracks with a lot of bass really shine and Disclosure's *Where You Come From* showcases the frequency bands from the background beat to the vocals in a powerful yet distinct from one another, clean overall mix. More demanding material, like AC/DC's *Thunderstruck*, is handled well with the sound signature complementing the electric guitar perfectly. Vocals are crisp too, with minimal distortion and while the high frequencies are very good, I'd say the sound balance is more refined at lower frequencies.

For those interested, 1More offers a free iOS and assistant app with a Smart Burn In feature that claims to improve driver performance to help the headphones settle in and reach optimum performance more quickly. Another potentially useful feature is



the noise-cancelling mode that uses the microphone array built into the headband to filter out background interference. It proves very effective in my tests and does little to alter the overall sound signature.

Fast charging is an added bonus, but I would like to see improved battery life – at around seven hours it's decidedly average for the class, but improvements should be possible in the future given the neck band design. For now though, this is a high quality in-ear headphone that leads the way with a super set of features at a very attractive price. **LT**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Triple Driver BT

PRICE
£120

WEBSITE
1more.com

REVIEWED
HFC 443

OUR VERDICT





Signature E Series

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Exposure XM HP

DOUBLING UP AS both a headphone amplifier and a high-quality preamplifier with a built-in phono stage, the front of the XM HP boasts a pair of 6.35mm headphone sockets alongside twin XLR outputs. Two sets of headphones can be used at the same time and there's a Wolfson WM8742 DAC chip fitted (running PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD64 via the asynchronous USB) that handles digital signals from the two coaxial BNC inputs, two Toslink optical inputs and a Class 2 USB digital input. Three analogue inputs are fitted, including two line inputs as well as a moving-magnet phono, complete with ground terminal.

Sound quality

The XM HP offers a really rather fine performance. It is powerful and smooth, yet detailed and musical;

there's no sense that it's really colouring the music, but nor does it strip it of its natural tone.

Wings' *London Town* is first on, and I am impressed by both the sumptuous bass guitar and piano line kicking off the track. The XM HP does not have that archetypal mid-forward solid-state sound; it's not chromium plated in the upper midband and treble. Instead there's lots of smoothness and a general lack of fizz. But just because it's tonally smooth doesn't make it bland. The Exposure is able to grab onto the bassline and articulate it well. Things sound supple and musical and start and stop on time.

Switching to the variable output and connected to an Arcam P49 power amplifier (HFC 409) driving Quad ESL-989 electrostatic loudspeakers, I am no less pleased.



Much of the unit's character on show via headphones carries over when working as a preamplifier. This means a big, strong sound that's tonally pretty neutral, but nicely nuanced with a fair smattering of detail.

The onboard DAC delivers a direct sound with plenty of gusto, delivering a spacious and enjoyable sound that is sufficiently animated.

There's a lot to like about the XM HP, but what's so impressive is that every aspect of this versatile product is done to a good standard. It brings a seamlessness to its performance across the board, which is rare in products of this price. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Exposure XM HP
PRICE
£1,299
TELEPHONE
01273 423877
WEBSITE
exposurehifi.com
REVIEWED
HFC 435

OUR VERDICT



iFi Audio xDSD

WITH A DAC chip based on the same Burr-Brown DSD1793 processor as the nano iDSD Black Label, the xDSD has a redesigned headphone amplifier, improved connectivity and aptX Bluetooth.

There's a single 3.5mm jack, which acts as the main headphone output, but can also switch into fixed-level line-out mode for use with a set of desktop speakers. The xDSD has a female USB-A port on the back that provides the main USB audio input, but it also includes a S/PDIF for optical or coaxial input. Battery life is quoted at 10 hours when using S/PDIF, dropping to eight with Bluetooth and six for USB.

Sound quality

There's not a hint of distortion as Queen launch into the multi-tracked gospel chorus of *Somebody To Love*. The vast *rondo* in the middle of the

song is thrilling, catching all the detail in the different layers of vocals, and there's a real zing to the sound as the alternate high/low vocals ricochet back and forth, while the rumbling drums and crisp hand-claps precisely set the pace.

The xDSD can handle Queen in heavy-rock mode too, as Brian May's power chords on *The Millionaire Waltz* strike like a sledge hammer. It's a big, fat head-banging guitar sound that's cleanly and precisely rendered. As the song reaches its absurd, overblown climax, the xDSD keeps its eye on all the details of the multi-tracked guitar fanfare, Mercury pounding away on the piano, and the whole vast concoction is topped off by the soaring harmonies.

In contrast, the more delicate *Snowflake* by Kate Bush sees the xDSD stepping back and giving this most delicate of tracks room to

breathe. The gentle flurry of piano notes float lightly through the air, capturing the sense of falling snow, yet are underpinned by the slow rumble of the drums that add an edge of urgency. The 3D+ filter offered by the xDSD also helps out here, slightly emphasising the left/right separation in order to open up the soundstage just a little more.

The xDSD justifies its price on sound quality alone, delivering a variety of music with admirable clarity and precision. Its slimline design is well suited to mobile use and it's equally adept as a desktop setup, thanks to its digital inputs and line out. **CJ**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio xDSD
PRICE
£399
TELEPHONE
01900 601954
WEBSITE
ifi-audio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 439

OUR VERDICT



Creek OBH-8mk2

A MOVING-MAGNET PHONO stage, the OBH-8mk2 uses an integrated circuit for the gain stage powered by a 24V supply. The reason why Creek uses such relatively hefty voltage is because it is split inside the phono stage to +/- 12V via a custom circuit. This means that the OBH-8mk2 can be DC coupled with no input or output coupling capacitors. Additionally, by using a capacitor to roll off below 5Hz and capacitance smoothing, Creek ensures that there is no unwanted noise.

The voltage swing available means that the circuit is effectively impossible to overload by any conventional means. It is also possible to use it with longer runs of cable – although they will need to be fairly flexible as, like a number of similarly lightweight designs, stiff interconnects move the unit into the

position wherever the cable wants. The rear connections are quite tightly grouped, but it is easy enough to make the required connections.

Sound quality

The most immediately notable aspect of the performance is the bass response. There is plenty of low-end output, but no less importantly, there is detail and texture sufficient to ensure that the sound is constantly believable and well integrated into the rest of the frequency response.

Give it a good-quality pressing like the superbly refined *Sunday Night Blues Club* by Fink, and the Creek positively shines. The shuffling groove of *Keep Myself Alone Now* is handled with an effortless sense of snap and immediacy underpinning a performance that is impressively three dimensional and that gives the



listener a real sense of the recording space. Compared with some more expensive rivals, the OBH-8mk2 can't quite manage to open this recording out to the extent that the very best can, but it is still very capable for the price. It is revealing enough to show the different presentation of Gold Note's £382 Vasari Gold (HFC 425) and Nagaoka's £350 MP-200 (HFC 434), and is no less happy working with the equivalently priced Ortofon 2M Blue 100 (HFC 435).

The OBH-8mk2 does a fine job of delivering the character of the turntable rather than adding its own spin on things and the low noise and useful level of gain are a real plus. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Creek OBH-8mk2
PRICE
£129
TELEPHONE
01442 260146
WEBSITE
creekaudio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 439

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Dynavector P75 Mk4

AS THE NAME suggests, there have been previous versions of the P75 – we saw the Mk3 in HFC 370. For this latest generation, the power supply – still a wall-wart unit – now has its AC input more heavily shielded from the rest of the circuit to reduce interference. The whole circuit is placed on a pull-out tray, allowing you to adjust gain, impedance as well as the unique Phono Enhancer functionality. This makes for neater externals, but also means the business of adjusting is a little more involved. One feature that is very handy is that capacitance can be set exactly via the insertion of a resistor into the circuit.

Sound quality

With the phono enhancer circuit off, the Dynavector has plenty of gain coupled with low background noise, helping it to extract fine detail from

The Cinematic Orchestra's *Ode To The Big Sea* that tends to be lost behind the bass, which avoids sounding bloated or overblown without losing any impact. The higher percussion is crisp and free from any splashiness and there is a commendable sense of snap and drive to the performance.

The tonality is excellent too. The solo trumpet is compellingly real in terms of scale and immediacy, which means that the vocals in My Baby's *Mary Morgan* are outstanding. They are brought to the front of the music, but never detached from it and the interplay between them and the acoustic guitar is just lovely. That same rhythmic assurance keeps the flow of the track without forcing it or distracting you from the musicianship on display. Ray LaMontagne's *Hey, No Pressure* demonstrates a fine sense of spaciousness and three dimensionality. The almost orchestral sweep of the



piece is captured in a manner that helps everything to sound confident and unforced.

Underpinning this confidence is a very well judged bass response. The Dynavector may not have the outright deepest bass, but there is a level of control, texture and integration to its low end that is hugely appealing, and it means that Depeche Mode's *Higher Love* is handled with a lovely combination of scale and punch. Switching to a standard moving-magnet setting does not significantly alter the presentation and the same usefully low background noise level and general sense of tonal realism and immediacy are retained. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Dynavector P75 Mk4
PRICE
£795
TELEPHONE
01665 830862
WEBSITE
pearaudio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 437

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Lindemann Limetree Phono

TAKING A SLIGHTLY different approach to its rivals, the circuit of the Limetree Phono is derived from a valve-based design but is entirely solid-state and makes use of high-quality components.

The input stages are separate and there are independent moving-magnet and moving-coil inputs on the rear. The moving-magnet section offers a conventional 40dB of gain while the moving-coil goes for a fixed 60dB, which should be enough for all but the lowest output cartridges and limited gain setups. There is a single RCA output and switching between the two input types is carried out via a switch on the front panel.

Sound quality

Initially connected to a £695 Goldring Legacy moving-coil cartridge mounted on a Gert

Pedersen-modified Michell GyroDec with SME M2-9 tonearm, the superb pressing of Amadou & Mariam's *La Confusion* is delivered with a fine balance of energy, space and refinement. The top end in particular manages to bring a little sweetness to the way it handles vocals, but it never sounds syrupy or overly warm.

It doesn't have the most prodigious bass, but what it offers is detail that's well defined and well integrated into the rest of the frequency response. The drum in the live version of *Sort Of Revolution* on Fink's *Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet* is felt as much as it is heard, but starts and stops with the speed of the real thing. The sense of the stage and its placement relative to the audience is compelling and well laid out with an appreciable grasp of the scale of the venue, too.

The star turn of the Limetree Phono, however, is with the moving-magnet



input. Connected to a £350 Nagaoka MP-200 moving-magnet cartridge (HFC 434), there is a wonderful tonal richness that is present with the moving-coil section but underpinned with a propulsive energy and sense of urgency that engages the listener the moment anything with an upbeat timing signature is played.

The Limetree Phono offers outstanding levels of performance with moving-magnet cartridges alongside a more than respectable moving-coil showing too, should you choose to upgrade at a later date. At the price, it's a gift to vinyl fans. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Lindemann
Limetree Phono
PRICE
£595
TELEPHONE
01334 570666
WEBSITE
eliteaudiouk.com
REVIEWED
HFC 441

OUR VERDICT



YBA Genesis PH1

AT THE HEART of this battery-powered phono stage is the op-amp based moving-magnet section, which works in conjunction with a moving-coil transformer. The circuit boards are cleanly arranged internally and give the option of moving-magnet and high or low output moving-coil cartridges, with an auto-sensing system to adjust the settings for the type of moving coil used – as long as you set the rear switch correctly. There's a choice of balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA outputs, giving it wider appeal. YBA claims the Genesis PH1 can be recharged up to 10,000 times, with eight hours of listening per charge.

Sound quality

Cue up a record and the sound is clean, open and three-dimensional with no obvious nasties. This is a neutral and even device without any

obvious bass bloom or searing treble. This goes for both moving-magnet cartridges and moving coils. Listening to Sparks' *The Number One Song In Heaven*, the soundstage is vast, the detailing impressive and I am particularly struck by the combination of life and vibrancy, together with tonal smoothness.

I have heard similarly priced solid state phono stages sound impressive, but nothing has matched the YBA's competence. The lack of mush, greyness and general 'audio smog' is quite a thing to hear – yet it doesn't sound ultra forensic or too incisive. It doesn't machine gun detail out at you, but rather invites you to peer into the recorded acoustic.

The overall production is superlative and with a great phono stage like this, it unwraps before your very ears. You can hear all the layers of sound, yet the result still seems highly polished



and gives depth and space to a recording that can sound small and quite artificial on the wrong equipment. Tonally, it is highly neutral. It doesn't add bass bloom down below, and nor does it have that saccharine 'cream puff' treble you often get from tube phono stages. Instead the YBA gets out of the way, letting the listener hear the striking difference in recording quality between Isaac Hayes' *Café Regio's* and The Jam's *Smithers-Jones*.

In short, if you're in the market for a phono stage, the battery-powered Genesis PH1 is worth seeking out. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
YBA Genesis PH1
PRICE
£1,800
TELEPHONE
01707 320788
WEBSITE
nintronics.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 442

OUR VERDICT



**WORTH
£2,440!**



WIN:

Rega's Planar 8 turntable fitted with Apheta 2 MC cartridge

What better way to start 2019 than with the best-performing deck of the year?

2 018 has been another year where vinyl's popularity showed no sign of abating and given Rega's work in redefining last year's Planar 6, the arrival of the new Planar 8 didn't come as the biggest surprise. However, few people could have predicted that it would be quite so different from pretty much every other turntable that the Southend-based specialist has produced up until now.

Borrowing design concepts and features liberally from the RP8, Planar 6 and – perhaps most impressive of all – Naiad flagship vinyl spinner, which is ordinarily only built to order in extremely limited numbers, the Planar 8 had vinylistas everywhere drooling in anticipation before we even had a chance to give it a spin.

Looking similar to the RP8 minus its plinth, the Planar 8 is actually 30 percent lighter than its sibling but beefed up by a careful addition of mass, most notably in the form of the three-piece laminate platter, which is constructed from two different types of glass – with a thicker section on the outside edge. Combined with the RB880 tonearm, Neo PSU and prefitted with a choice of MC cartridges, it's a tantalising prospect.

Planar perfection

Happily the Planar 8 is not just a pretty face, and seals the deal by sounding every bit as good as it looks. The implication that bass response is tied to mass is swiftly laid to rest, thanks to a truly wonderful low end. Not content with being tuneful and impeccably

integrated, it's also delivered with plenty of force and matched by a treble performance that's equally compelling. Throw into the mix the irresistible combination of rock steady pitch stability, silence at idle, incredible emotional engagement and an ability to drag the best performance even from well worn LPs and you have not only the best turntable we've seen in 2018, but an exceptional prize for *HFC* readers.

But Rega's generosity doesn't end there as the company has additionally thrown in an Apheta 2 moving-coil cartridge, deftly showcasing everything that's good about the Planar 8 even further. To be in with a chance of owning this formidable turntable package, answer the simple question opposite and enter at: www.hifichoice.co.uk. Good luck!



**TO BE IN WITH A
CHANCE OF WINNING,
ANSWER THIS SIMPLE
QUESTION:**

What is the name of Rega's built-to-order flagship turntable?

- A) Planar 10
- B) Naiad
- C) Planar 8

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Visit our website at: www.hifichoice.co.uk/competitions and follow the instructions to enter

To submit your entry to the Rega competition, simply register using the online form and provide your answer to the question shown above. Please ensure you complete all required fields, including your email address, telephone number (including area code) and postal address. We regret we cannot take postal entrants.

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**Arguably the best
turntable of 2018
and a fitting prize
for *HFC* readers**

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Music reviews



Jack White Boarding House Reach



Vinyl **Third Man Records**



WITH THE WHITE Stripes, Jack White released six studio albums in eight years, but his solo career has proceeded at a much more leisurely pace. The four years that have elapsed since his 2014 Grammy-winning solo album *Lazaretto* represent his longest silence to date – although it would be unfair to suggest that he's been idle in that time. Now a big shot mogul with his own Third Man label and studio in Nashville, in the last year alone he's produced Beyoncé, A Tribe Called

Quest, Lillie Mae, and *The American Epic Sessions* featuring Alabama Shakes, Elton John, Beck and Willie Nelson, among others.

Boarding House Reach returns him to what he does best – making his own records full of blistering guitar riffs on songs packed with invention and innovation that dig deep into a tradition that reaches back through rock heroes such as Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page to the pre-war blues masters of the Delta.

His third solo album expands his sonic terrain to constitute his most ambitious and visionary work to date, adding electro, funk, neo-punk, hip-hop, gospel and even country to his crunching blues-rock power. Opener *Connected By Love* kicks off with throbbing synths and a yelping howl, followed by organ and gospel vocals, creating a mood that evokes Blur's *Tender*.

Why Walk A Dog is a slow-burning blues-rocker with a great fuzz-tone guitar solo. *Corporation* sounds like a classic White Stripes song with an ear-worming riff that could end up as a stadium staple like *Seven Man Army*. *Hypermisophoniatic* and *Ice Station Zebra* are audacious forays into hip-hop. *Over And Over And Over* boasts the sort of monstrous stop-start guitar riff that Led Zep would be proud of. The instrumental *Respect Commander* thrillingly combines snarling guitar and bombastic synths. *Get In The Mind Shaft* is squelchy and funky, with vocals delivered via a vocoder. *What's Done Is Done* is a weepy country ballad that stays just the right side of pastiche, before the album ends with the plaintive piano ballad *Humouresque* on which White sounds uncannily like Badly Drawn Boy.

In between, he even recites a couple of enigmatic poems and if there's a criticism of the album it's that in places it seems wilfully perverse with almost too many ideas to take in. As ever with White, the album comes imaginatively presented in a number of formats, including a limited edition 'Vault Package' with coloured vinyl, holographic art and a 7in single containing early demo versions of two of the songs. But however you chose to consume *Boarding House Reach*, all that really matters is that Jack is back – and at the top of his creative game. **NW** ►



Felix Mendelssohn

Symphonies Nos. 4&5
NDR Radiophilharmonie
Andrew Manze

★★★★★

CD **Pentatone**

PENTATONE'S MENDELSSOHN

SYMPHONY cycle continues with No.4, *Italian* and No. 5, *Reformation*. With a careful attention to blend, balance and tuning, both performances are beautifully sonorous, aided by the deep acoustic of Hanover's Grosser Sendesaal. The stereo mix lacks a bit of clarity in the busier passages, but the surround mix is excellent. The strings are refined and cope well with Mendelssohn's demands, while the winds are polished and rounded. In general Manze opts for the

Both performances are aided by the deep acoustic of Hanover's Grosser Sendesaal

poise of steadier tempos. In the *Italian* the central movements are best, with particularly delightful *Pilgrims' March*. *The Reformation* begins with stunning brass and strings, and the *Allegro Vivace* is immaculate. If the *Andante* is touch cool, the finale brings a fitting conclusion. From Abbado to Karajan, the competition here is tough, but this gorgeous-sounding surround sound release is certainly very attractive. **JG**

MUSICREVIEWS

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Charles Mingus *Pithecanthropus Erectus*

180g vinyl

Speakers Corner/Atlantic



CHARLES MINGUS

WAS a bass player a bit like Beethoven was a pianist, in other words he was a whole lot more than just a bass player. Composer, arranger, visionary, you name it,

Mingus' genius is encapsulated in the title track of this 1956 release. A piece that cruises along on a perfect groove and then explodes into freeform mayhem at just the right moment, but before it gets too much it returns to a clearer path with Jackie Mclean on alto and JR Monterose on tenor plus the occasional glimpse of Mal Waldron's

sophistication on the piano. The sound of this mono recording is very much of its time, bandwidth is clearly limited, which means bass is woolly and cymbals can be fuzzy. But dynamics are good and tone is superb. It was called a High Fidelity recording on its release and that is true when it comes to the music, it proves rather worryingly that when a band of this calibre plays live in the studio the message is abundantly clear without the aid of sparkly highs and bone crunching lows. This album was *avant garde* when released and sounds exciting today, pushing the form right up to the edge but avoiding the excesses that were to follow a decade later. In other words, it's a scorcher. **JK**



Aretha Franklin

The Atlantic Singles
Collection 1967-1970

★★★★★

2x vinyl

Atlantic/Rhino

ORIGINALLY ANNOUNCED A month before the sad passing of the Queen of Soul, any suggestions of this being a cash-in are seriously misplaced. Instead, this collection of some of Aretha's more memorable hits serves as a timely reminder of arguably her most fruitful period of recording, spanning as it does six glorious albums. Arranged chronologically and featuring everything from *I Never Loved A Man (The Way I Love You)* through to *Border Song (Holy Moses)*, this is a fitting tribute to the greatest soul singer that ever lived. **JDW**



Bugge Wesseltoft & Prins Thomas Bugge Wesseltoft & Prins Thomas

★★★★★

CD

Smalltown Supersound

THERE'S A LOT more to Norwegian music than the chilled jazz of Jan Garbarek, a fact made very clear by keyboard meister Bugge Wesseltoft since his New Concept Of Jazz project 20 years ago. He's joined here by 'space disco' specialist Prins Thomas who adds synths, bass and percussion to the improvised piano and Jon Christensen's drums. The result combines light and dark with some perfect grooves and rather good sound, especially when the layers are stripped away to leave only acoustic instruments. Thomas provides the beats, Wesseltoft the exploration and between them they weave a mesmerising spell. **JK**



Walton

Symphonies 1 and 2
Bournemouth Symphony
Orchestra.
Kirill Karabits

★★★★★

CD

Onyx

THE BENCHMARK RECORDING for *Walton 1* remains Previn's 1966 LSO account, but this new one from Karabits bears comparison. The Previn has an edge-of-the-seat urgency that no subsequent recording has ever quite equalled, but Karabits offers plenty of vitality, and sonically his recording is superior. The second symphony gets an even better performance; one that brings out all its jazzy bite and cool sardonic verve. The Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra plays superbly and the Onyx recording sounds bright clean and detailed, with good clarity and excellent dynamics – albeit, slightly recessed timpani. **JH**



HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



Jorja Smith
Lost & Found



onkyomusic.com

FLAC 24/44.1

WALSALL 21-YEAR-OLD JORJA Smith is a rising star thanks to her collaborations with Drake and Stormzy, and her debut long player shows what all the fuss is about. A beguiling mix of R&B, soul, pop and trip-hop, it's all underpinned by her smoky, affecting voice. Whether she's crooning about lost love or the state of society, there's real depth and maturity here. Beats are precise and crunchy, while Smith's incredible voice soars above it all. **PH**



First Aid Kit
Ruins



onkyomusic.com

FLAC 24/88.2

IF EVER THERE was an album you'd want to listen to in best-possible resolution, this is it. The Söderberg sisters' fourth LP gleams and chimes with sonorous folk loveliness. Their style comes complete with beautiful harmonies and powerful solo warbling set to a soundtrack of epic piano, stirring strings and twangy guitar. Final track *Nothing Has To Be True* is a case in point: clear as crystal plaintive vocals rising to an emotive crescendo. Glorious stuff. **PH**

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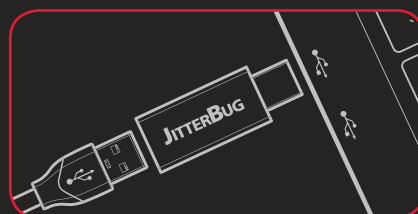
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**Ernie Hawks
And The Soul
Investigators**

Scorpio Man



Vinyl/CD

Timmion

ARMED ONLY WITH his flute, Ernie Hawks is determined to take us back to *The Streets Of San Francisco* or some other cult cop show from the sixties or seventies. Meanwhile his Soul Investigators go about their business with the kind of tasteful soul/jazz sensibilities that make this album sound so damn authentic as if the ghost of Marvin Gaye circa *Trouble Man* was in the studio with Ernie and his boys. It's good, very good, and impeccably produced with a cohesion that makes this an album worth devouring in its entirety. **PSH**



The Beta Band
The Three EPs (20th anniversary re-issue)



Vinyl

Because Music

RELEASED BETWEEN 1997 and 1998, The Beta Band's first three EPs revealed an incredible new original sound that proved difficult to live up to on the albums that followed. Like its legendary live shows where the band would all change instruments mid-jam, *The Three EPs* features a mixed up hypnotic swirling kaleidoscope of sound that reviewers struggled to describe plumping rather lazily for 'folktronica'. Regardless, it remains a gem worth hunting down if only to experience its gumbo mix of exotic chanting, hip-hop beats, fake Japanese rapping, acoustic wonderment and cut-and-paste madness. **JDW** ►



Chadwick
Symphonic
Sketches
Elgar The New
England
Connection



Orchid Classics

CD

GEORGE CHADWICK IS rarely heard today. Alas, he did not have Elgar's depth and originality, but his music is attractive and well crafted. His *Symphonic Sketches* are well worth hearing, especially when played as well as this. Meanwhile, in the *Enigma Variations* conductor Andrew Constantine delivers a warmly phrased, sensitive performance that gets straight to the heart of this sublime score. No tricks; no heroic gestures; just the music, lovingly played, and exquisitely shaped. The recordings sound clear and naturally balanced, with excellent detail and dynamics, plus some nice deep organ pedals at the end of the Elgar. **JH**

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Laurie Anderson & Kronos Quartet Landfall

★★★★★

CD Nonesuch

A LOT HAS happened to plunge Laurie Anderson's life into post-millennial gloom since her last album *Homeland* eight years ago. She lost husband Lou Reed to a heart attack in 2013, but it's another trauma that inspired *Landfall*: the destruction of Hurricane Sandy, which flooded New York, cutting power in and around the city.

Anderson's home was hit by the full force of the storm and she lost most of her most cherished possessions, an experience she describes in *Everything Is Floating*, which acts as the fulcrum of these 30 short pieces evoking the horror of a city plunged into chaos and exploring the terrifying realisation that our civilisation is a fragile construct that nature can sweep away in an instant.

Over haunting, neo-classical strings in a flat, almost deadpan voice she describes the devastation once the hurricane had done its worse: "All the things I'd carefully saved all my life becoming nothing but junk... and I saw it, how beautiful, how magic and how catastrophic".

Anderson has made her career as an iconic storyteller, but she has surely never summed up the human condition more profoundly and poignantly: we are enslaved by our past and yet liberation from it can also be an act of cathartic deliverance. *Everything Is Floating* is one of only three or four

tracks with lyrics on a predominantly instrumental album, but the story is told vividly without words by the juxtaposition of Anderson's lush electronics and beats and the haunting strings of the Kronos Quartet – David Harrington (violin), John Sherba (violin), Hank Dutt (viola) and Sunny Yang (cello).

The music feels as epic as the storm itself, a set of striking sonic sculptures that trace the arc of the narrative from CNN's warning of a monster storm coming through the wind that presages the rain whistling through the dark, the water rising, the streets turning into rivers and the electricity going out. In the end as the storm abates we are left with the flotsam and jetsam of human existence bobbing on the receding floodwaters – and the realisation that life can never be the same again.

All of this is reflected in music that is alternately beautiful and stark and ranges from the elegiac to the terrifying, enhanced by the use of an optigan (a keyboard that uses information stored on optical discs), and sophisticated electronics that delay and echo the harmonies of the quartet's riveting playing.

It's a work of such extraordinary singularity that it doesn't throw up a set of easy signposts, but admirers of Brian Eno, Björk, Can, Jean-Michel Jarre and the Steve Reich/Terry Riley school of contemporary composition will be captivated. **NW** ▶



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Hailey Tuck *Junk*

★★★★★

CD Sony

HAILEY TUCK HAS some nerve. Unable to get a recording deal and noting that her favourite jazz records by singers such as Madeleine Peyroux and Melody Gardot had all been produced by Larry Klein, she set about stalking the Grammy-winning producer. After getting hold of his email address, she sent him an unsolicited message saying that she was convinced that they could "make a great album together".

To her surprise, Klein – who has an uncanny knack of coaxing the best out of female singers and whose other production credits include Tracy Chapman and ex-wife Joni Mitchell – replied that she should come and see him the next time she was in Los Angeles. Tuck was there within hours.

Impressed by her voice, Klein agreed to produce her and used his contacts to get her a deal with Sony. "It's nuts for jazz not to mix with other genres. It needs to get out there and have some fun," she told him. "Straight away, we were on the same page."

Although the album they recorded together is titled *Junk*, it's a masterclass in sophisticated artistry, jazzy in its aesthetic but with a broad appeal to rock fans with exquisite covers of songs by the likes of Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Paul McCartney, Pulp's Jarvis Cocker and Ray Davies of the Kinks.

It takes a bold ambition and a special voice to interpret songs by such singular writers and take ownership of them, but Tuck has the character and back story to pull it off. Educated at a Baptist military boarding school, she ran away at 18 with what was supposed to be her college fund, singing in the jazz and burlesque clubs of Paris.

From there to recording in Hollywood's famous Sunset Sound studios with Klein and a bunch of veteran jazz sophisticates was a long and sometimes tortuous path, but making one's debut album at the relatively advanced age of 28 has its advantages. Although the songs on *Junk* are mostly covers, she sings them as if she has lived them. "All sorts of emotional baggage is on there, tons of f***ed-up times," she says. "Topics on which, believe me, I'm an expert."

Adding a couple of show tunes from *Cabaret* and Leonard Bernstein's *On The Town*, she sings – with a delicious, sly guile that is addictively dark and yet simultaneously playful. Every modern-day jazz chanteuse tends to be held up against the likes of Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, but Tuck throws in a touch of Liza Minnelli and Bette Midler and delivers the package with the glamorous style of a twenties flapper icon. The mix is quite irresistible and is destined to make her a huge star. **NW**



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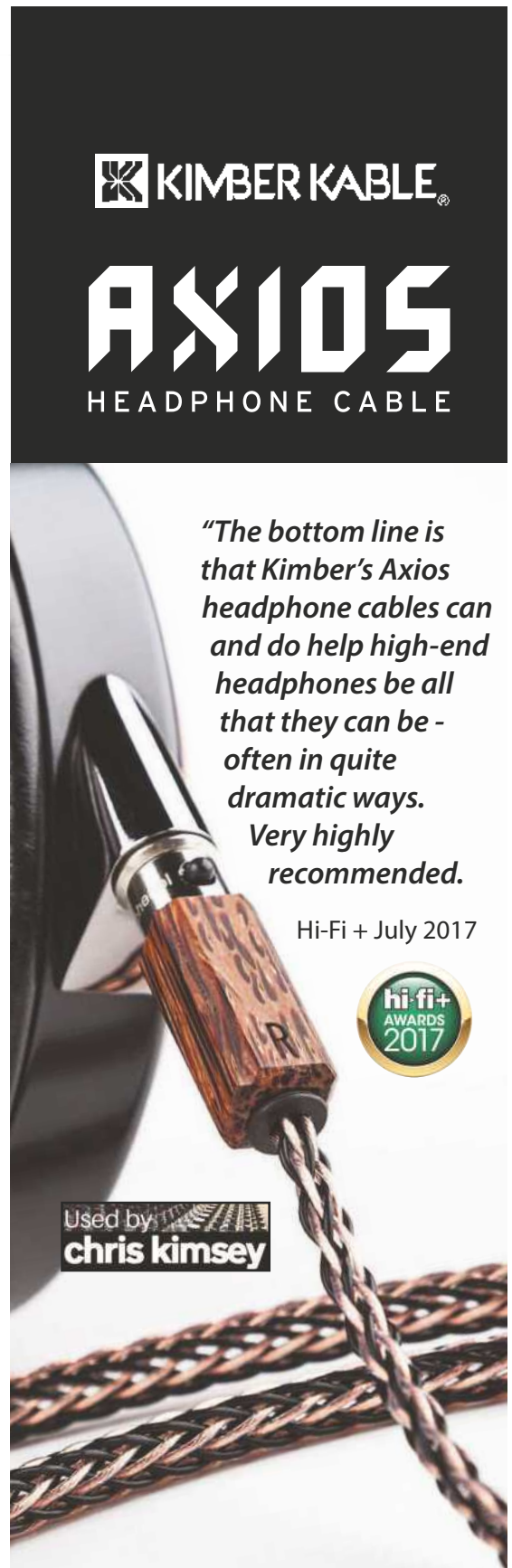
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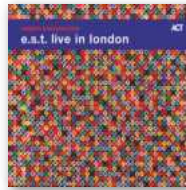
Joseph Haydn Piano Trios Trio Wanderer



CD **Harmonia Mundi**

THE BEAUX ARTS Trio's legendary Haydn recordings may remain the benchmark, but this delightful collection comes highly recommended. The French trio performs with skill, elegance and style with an emphasis on warm, broad phrasing. Pianist Vincent Coq impresses with delicately nimble and even passage work throughout. Violinist Jean-Marc Phillips-Varjabédian's tone is sweet and refined. Raphaël Pidoux's cello secure and warm. The recorded sound is well balanced and tonally beautiful, but rather reverberant. However, its spacious nature compliments the performances rather well. **JG**

EST Live In London



CD **ACT**

TO MARK THE 10th anniversary of the sad death of Swedish pianist Esbjörn Svensson, ACT has released this concert recording from the Barbican made in 2005. Svensson's trio with Dan Berglund (bass) and Magnus Öström (drums) combined jazz imagination with a mainstream appeal. 12 years after their debut EST were at the peak of their powers. Confident and extremely capable, they improvise on virtually every track - so some are pretty long. The sound is open and detailed, but not large scale nor as dynamic as it could be. The music is addictive and full of variety, making this one for fans and newcomers alike. **JK**

Björk Utopia



CD/Vinyl **One Little Indian**

IF VULNICURA WAS Björk's 'break-up' album, this is her dating follow up and you can hear the optimism throughout. She has always managed to fuse classical, electronic and pop to create something incredible. Yes, there are wind instruments, soaring choral accompaniments and crunchy beats galore, but *Utopia* is imbued with chirping sounds from the forest, children laughing and playing and Björk's own layered vocals. It's a sonic feast, and so enchanting and emotionally engaging that you can almost reach out and touch it. **PH**

Bach Complete Works for Organ Marie-Claire Alain



15x CDs **Erato**

MARIE-CLAIRE ALAIN MADE three complete stereo recordings of Bach's organ works, but her first set has never been on CD, until now. I had the LPs and loved the fluent brilliance of her playing, plus the bright tangy registrations she chose. She re-recorded the music in the seventies, and again (in digital) in the nineties. Yet the freshness of her first cycle was never equalled. Her sixties Bach playing exudes a sense of fun that is captivating, and the recordings still sound crisp, detailed, and clear. Her fabulous technique ensured great clarity allied to the utmost precision, yet there's never anything turgid or 'academic' about her playing. **JH**

Poppy Ackroyd Resolve



Vinyl/CD **One Little Indian**

HAVING ALREADY MADE a name for herself playing piano and/or violin alongside the likes of Hauschka and Nils Frahm, Poppy Ackroyd is finally given the canvas her extraordinary talent deserves on this, her first full-length album. The result is a beguiling mix of music that is equal parts wildly experimental (witness the toy piano and wine glasses on *Stems*) and wonderfully evocative (the increasing adagio of *Trains* simulating its subject perfectly). A gloriously cinematic piece of music, this is a perfect fusion of old and new classical techniques that is startling without being wilfully minimalist or overly 'out there'. **JDW**

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"...A Game
Changer!"

- Matt,
TCG Head-fi Oct. 3



Anna Calvi Hunter

★★★★★

CD Domino

IT'S ALMOST 25 years since Blur stormed the charts with the gender-bending line: "Girls who are boys, who like boys to be girls, who do boys like they're girls, who do girls like they're boys". At the time the acronym LGBTQ hadn't been invented: its first recorded use came in 1996. Since then, transgender issues have come to the fore and generated considerable controversy. It's a conversation into which Anna Calvi steps fearlessly on her third album. "I'll be the boy, you be the girl, I'll be the girl, you be the boy," she sings on *Chain*, one of the most dramatic songs on *Hunter*. The theme permeates as she explores the deeper nuances and urges of her sexuality on songs such as *As A Man* and *Don't Beat The Girl Out Of My Boy*.

"I want to go beyond gender and to explore a more subversive sexuality," she explains. "I don't want to choose between the male and female in me. I'm fighting against feeling an outsider and trying to find a place that feels like home." It's a journey that's clearly had a cathartic and highly liberating effect on her music.

Born in West London to an English mother and an Italian father, the gamine-like Calvi didn't start singing until she was in her mid-twenties but made up for lost time when her debut album, 2011's *Anna Calvi*, was shortlisted for the Mercury Music Prize, as

was its 2013 follow-up *One Breath*. Back after a five year hiatus, on *Hunter* Calvi's sexually charged art-rock sounds edgier and more atmospheric than ever as she pushes her intense voice to the limit. Co-produced by Nick Launay, whose credits include Arcade Fire and Nick Cave, there's something about Calvi's sensibility that recalls the latter's darkness, although PJ Harvey and Siouxsie Sioux are more obvious touchstones.

Conjuring a wild sound that is raw and primal, yet possesses a strange and visceral beauty, the power of her music derives not only from her striking voice but from her virtuosic guitar playing. *Hunter* is a record not only for aficionados of female singer-songwriting but for lovers of classic guitar-rock, driven by the explosive sound of her Fender Telecaster cranked through a vintage Vox AC30. From screeching Hendrix-style guitar pyrotechnics on *Wish* to the harsh riffing on *Indies Or Paradise*, there are few of any gender in contemporary music who play with such ferocious self-assurance while smartly avoiding the standard rock guitar clichés.

Yet on songs such as the dreamy *Swimming Pool* and the haunting closer *Eden*, Calvi does vulnerable as well as strong, which means this is a record that is as much about the hunted as it is about the hunter. Either way the results are totally enthralling. **NW**

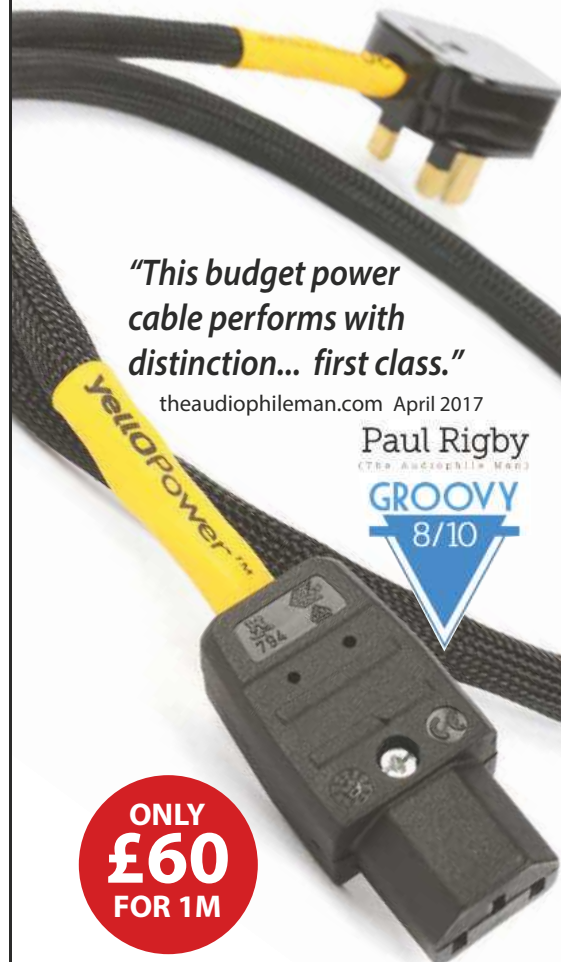
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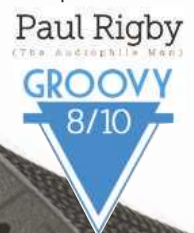
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REAL REAL GONE

Forget the curmudgeonly persona, when it comes to making stunningly original and endlessly soulful music no one comes even close to Van the man

If you like your music legends to boast the glamorous looks of a matinee idol, then Van Morrison isn't really for you. If you expect them to be cute and affable as they sign autographs and pose for selfies, then you've definitely come to the wrong place. But if all you really care about is the transcendence of the music and one of the most evocatively soulful voices of all time, then Van is the man. He's been called "moody, unpredictable, perverse, often downright wilful" – a description with which he presumably has no argument as it appeared in the liner notes of some of his own albums. Over the years he has turned the concept of the 'difficult artist' into an art form in itself. He has fired entire bands in a fit of rage after a gig, only to have to

re-hire them the next day because there was another gig to play. Over the years interviewers have been treated either to furious rants about the iniquities of the music industry and the "fame game" or been met by begrudging monosyllabic grunts.

He's the only musician that refused to turn up for his own induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and his former press officer claimed that on visits to his record company's offices staff "would literally hide in the cupboards so as not to have to confront him".

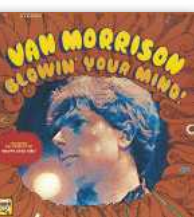
This might all be dismissed as irrelevant gossip and tittle-tattle, except that the contradictions between his sublimely sensitive music and the prickliness of his personality seem to go to the core of his artistry. Without one, perhaps it is impossible to have the other.

It's as if he fears that if he chills out, his creative capacity will freeze up, too. "Everything is a curse and a blessing," he once said. "There's two sides to everything in this life."

Morrison has always seen himself as a singular artist and a man apart. Although the material rewards fame has brought have been gratefully accepted, he has long hated the concept of celebrity. He's never sought to engage with his fan base at all. His attitude seems to say: "If you like my music that's great, but it's nothing to do with me".

He claims that it is "absurd" to call him a rock star and upbraided one newspaper for intruding into his privacy by saying: "I do not want or need that attention, having spent most of my life living the role of an anti-hero and getting on with my job."

1967



LOWLIN' YOUR MIND!

Disowned by Van and a false start to his solo career, for pure – but at least three of the eight tracks are classics, including the unforgettable Crowned Eyed Girl.

1968



ASTRAL WEEKS

The masterpiece and vying ever since with the likes of *Pet Sounds*, *Sgt. Pepper* and *Blonde On Blonde* for the top spot in every 'best albums of all time' list.

1969



MOONDANCE

Astral was unrepeatable so he took a different approach. With six of the 10 tracks under four minutes, it was more conventional – but still damn near perfect.

1970



HIS BAND AND THE STREET CHOIR

Classic R&B (*I've Been Working*) and burnished lyricism (*Virgo Clowns* and *Crazy Face*) on a set of polished songcraft.

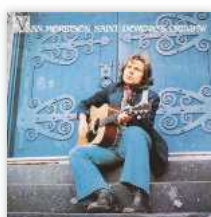
1971



TUPELO HONEY

A little bit country, a little bit jazz and even a waltz or two: Van had never sounded so sweet, playful and dappled in rustic contentment as he does here.

1972



SAINT DOMINIC'S PREVIEW

The perfect early Van album, from the incantatory adventures of *Listen To The Lion* to the joyous R&B uplift of *Jackie Wilson Said*.

Van Morrison

MUSIC LEGENDS VAN MORRISON

1973	1974	1975	1977	1978	1979
					
HARD NOSE THE HIGHWAY After a prodigious five album run, the songs don't hit the same high spots – although it's still a classic by anyone else's standards.	IT'S TOO LATE TO STOP NOW One of the finest bands Van ever assembled, the 11-piece Caledonia Soul Orchestra captured on stage at their delirious peak.	VEEDON FLEECE Eight songs written on a pilgrimage back to Ireland, but recorded on his return to America and mesmerising Celtic folk-soul at its most affecting.	A PERIOD OF TRANSITION Back with Dr John – although the good doctor later admitted it was the only time he'd ever felt like punching a fellow musician.	WAVELENGTH Wavelength sees Van at his most breezy and radio-friendly on a set that ranges from the profound (<i>Take It Where You Find It</i>) to the playful (<i>Natalia</i>).	INTO THE MUSIC The beginning of a spiritual quest on songs such as <i>And The Healing Has Begun</i> and <i>Full Force Gale</i> . Features Ry Cooder and James Brown's horn man Pee Wee Ellis.

"I don't suit the music business," he once admitted. "I'm incompatible with the way things are done. It's not easy doing what I do. It's not easy being able to fight with these people." Yet if many find it hard to warm to the image of the truculent anti-hero at war with the world, there are few who would deny the potent genius of his music.

Listen to the lion

His recorded legacy spans the gamut of rock, blues, pop, soul, country, gospel, jazz, folk and R&B. His rhapsodic 1968 masterpiece *Astral Weeks* is regularly listed in the top two or three in polls of the best albums of all time. Yet with typical perversity, he spent years refusing to recognise its significance tartly pointing out that it failed to chart because nobody bought it at the time.

Indeed, he often seemed positively annoyed by the retrospective acclaim it receives. "The arrangements are too samey," he complained tetchily. "It meant something to me when I was doing it. Now it doesn't."

Few agree, and Elvis Costello summed up the view of most when he described *Astral Weeks* as: "The most adventurous record made in the rock medium, there hasn't been a record with that amount of daring since".

Morrison eventually relented in his harsh opinion of his timeless classic and on the album's 40th anniversary in 2008, he

performed *Astral Weeks* in its entirety live at the Hollywood Bowl with an orchestra. "The songs are poetic stories, so the meaning is the same as always – timeless and unchanging works of fiction that will inherently have a different meaning for different people," he conceded. "People take from it whatever their disposition to take from it is."

Perhaps he was simply nervous about being defined by a record made so early in his

Warner Bros president Joe Smith ungraciously described Morrison as "a hateful little guy"

career. *Astral Weeks* was a one-off, written and recorded when he was just 23 years old. Arguably the most *sui generis* album ever created, it enigmatically continues to defy categorisation. Its combination of romantic reminiscing and spiritual yearning captured a unique and fleeting moment in time – and there was so much more that Morrison wanted to do.

Since *Astral Weeks* there have been 40 more albums – and still counting – in one of the richest, most prolific and varied careers in rock and in which the quality control has remained consistently and staggeringly high.

Born George Ivan Morrison in August 1945 into a working class Protestant family in Belfast, his father was an electrician in the shipyards and an enthusiastic record collector whose jazz and blues 78s instilled an early love of music in his son.

He hadn't even reached his teens when he fell under the spell of rock and roll and its British off-shoot, skiffle. By the age of 12 he had formed his first group, singing songs by Jerry Lee Lewis and Lonnie Donegan.

Precious time

Self-taught on guitar, saxophone and harmonica, he left school as soon as he could and by 1960 was a member of the Irish showband The Monarchs, with whom he enjoyed his first taste of life on the road, touring Britain and Germany.

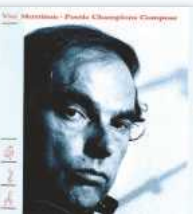
Back in Belfast, in 1963 he formed Them, one of the first beat groups in Ireland, before they moved to London and signed to Decca the following year. Like The Rolling Stones, The Animals and The Yardbirds, Them were heavily influenced by American blues and R&B and enjoyed their first top 10 hit in 1965 with a cover of the blues standard *Baby Please Don't Go*, which revealed Morrison as one of the grittiest and most dramatic blue-eyed soul singers of his generation. On the b-side was *Gloria*, his first great composition and destined to become a garage-rock classic. ▶

1980	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
					
COMMON ONE A glorious excursion into the heart of mythical Avalon, built around two ethereal 15-minute reveries, <i>Summertime In England</i> and <i>When Heart Is Open</i> .	BEAUTIFUL VISION Van returns to more concise song structures and an almost easy-listening sound. Highlights include <i>Dweller On The Threshold</i> and <i>Vanlose Stairway</i> .	INARTICULATE SPEECH OF THE HEART Scientology and new-age synths. Four of the 11 tracks are instrumentals but <i>Rave On John Donne</i> ranks alongside his lyrical best.	LIVE AT THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE BELFAST A sophisticated live set that eschews his canonical seventies albums in favour of 10 songs from his early eighties output.	A SENSE OF WONDER The music is equally joyous as Van's smile on the front – covers, instrumentals, and top-notch songs such as <i>Tore Down a la Rimbaud</i> and the title track.	NO GURU, NO METHOD, NO TEACHER A mix of jazz, Celtic soul and metaphysical rapture that travel deep into the mystic, with <i>In The Garden</i> as the flawless highlight.

MUSIC LEGENDS

VAN MORRISON

1987



CELTIC CHAMPIONS IMPOSE

Songs such as *Queen Of The Slipstream*, *Give Me My Capture* and *Did Ye Get Healed?* interspersed with moody jazz instrumentals.

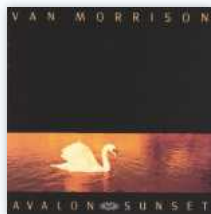
1988



IRISH HEARTBEAT

"This man of the blues coming home," was how Chieftains' Paddy Moloney described this meeting between Morrison's Celtic soul and trad Irish folk.

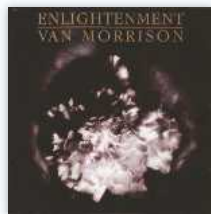
1989



AVALON SUNSET

Van goes mainstream with Cliff Richard on *Whenever God Shines His Light* while Rod Stewart would turn *Have I Told You Lately* into a wedding standard.

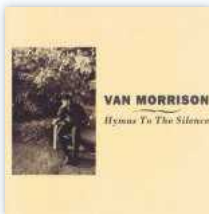
1990



ENLIGHTENMENT

From swaggering opener *Real Real Gone* to the evocative nostalgia of *In The Days Before Rock 'n' Roll*, this was Morrison's highest-charting album to date.

1991



HYMNS TO THE SILENCE

A double album full of majestic moments. The last with a strong religious theme, a couple of the 21 songs are genuine church hymns.

1993



TOO LONG IN EXILE

John Lee Hooker's presence lends an earthy, elemental fire while *Till We Get The Healing Done* and the title track are among his finest mature compositions.

The follow-up, *Here Comes The Night*, sold even better and reached number two in the UK singles chart. Yet it was the group's last major hit. Within little more than a year, them had broken up and Morrison had moved to America to launch a solo career.

After signing with Bang Records, run by Bert Berns who had written and produced *Here Comes The Night*, the results ranged from the brilliant *Brown-Eyed Girl*, three minutes of pop perfection that gave him an American top-10 hit in 1967, to the dark and cathartic stream-of-consciousness that was *TB Sheets*.

Into the mystic

Yet not for the first time, Morrison found himself at odds with the record industry. Both songs appeared on the 1967 album *Blowin' Your Mind!*, which he complained was released by Berns against his wishes. He had a point. Much of the rest of the material on the album was unfinished, raw-sounding demo form and the experience left him feeling bitter and angry. The resentment remained with him for the rest of his career: songs about the pitfalls of stardom and the evil machinations of a music industry have littered his albums ever since.

When Morrison signed to Warner Brothers and fulfilled his contractual obligation to Bang by delivering an album of unreleasable

fragments of gibberish with titles such as *Blowin' Your Nose* and *Want A Danish*.

With a new deal that for the first time in his life gave him artistic control, the result was *Astral Weeks*. Written and conceived over many months living in seclusion in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the eight songs in effect constituted a single and semi-improvised tone poem, backed by top jazz musicians,

1979 marked the start of a spiritual quest that was to have a profound effect on his music

strings, flute and acoustic bass in which Morrison brilliantly modulated his rhapsodic vocals as another instrument in the mix.

If it was too experimental and audacious for popular tastes of the time, the follow-up *Moondance* explored similarly jazzy themes but moulded them into more tightly structured, radio-friendly songs and represented a commercial breakthrough.

Now married and seemingly living in bucolic contentment in Woodstock, his next two albums, *His Band And Street Choir* and the pastoral-tinged *Tupelo Honey*, established him as a leading figure in the singer-songwriter movement of the day and found him

marketed by Warners alongside such artists as James Taylor, Neil Young and Joni Mitchell.

The association with Southern California's 'canyon rock' school was enhanced when he moved to the West Coast for his next album, 1972's *Saint Dominic's Preview*, on which he revisited the epic adventurism of *Astral Weeks* on such tracks as *Listen To The Lion* and *Almost Independence Day*.

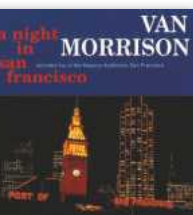
Warm love

Further albums in similarly lyrical style followed with 1973's *Hard Nose The Highway* and the gorgeous *Veedon Fleece* the following year, which found him turning back to his Irish heritage for inspiration. Yet the idea of Morrison as a mellow hippie was misleading, for his roots lay firmly in R&B, as he showed in his live shows at the time with a red-hot band he dubbed the Caledonia Soul Orchestra.

Their blistering chemistry was captured on the 1974 double LP, *It's Too Late To Stop Now*, which included songs by the likes of Sonny Boy Williamson, Willie Dixon and Ray Charles alongside Morrison's own compositions and is widely regarded by critics as one of the finest concert albums of all time.

When his marriage broke up, he left his wife and daughter in America and returned to Britain, unsure of what he wanted to do next. A severe case of writer's block set in and it was three years before he broke his silence

1994



NIGHT IN SAN FRANCISCO

A generous set of wailing blues and rip-roaring R&B. Guests include John Lee Hooker, Junior Wells and Jimmy Witherspoon.

1995



DAYS LIKE THIS

One of his most delightful late-period albums, with a lightness of spirit. The poignant title track, *Perfect Fit* and *In The Afternoon* are all mellow classics.

1995



HOW LONG HAS THIS BEEN GOING ON

Van goes jazz, mixing standards such as *That's Life* and *Who Can I Turn To?* with a memorable be-bop version of *Moondance*.

1996



TELL ME SOMETHING

A tribute to Mose Allison, the best moments coming when Van duets with ol' Mose himself on *I Don't Want Much* and *Perfect Moment*.

1997



THE HEALING GAME

A classic Van mix of bucolic metaphysics (*Rough God Goes Riding*), R&B (*It Once Was My Life*) and unashamed nostalgia (*Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*).

1998



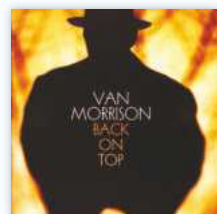
THE SKIFFLE SESSIONS - LIVE IN BELFAST

Fifties skiffle hero Lonnie Donegan joins the man on such folk-blues standards as *Midnight Special* and *Goodnight Irene*.

Van Morrison

MUSIC LEGENDS VAN MORRISON

1999 ▶ 2000 ▶ 2002 ▶ 2003 ▶ 2005 ▶ 2006 ▶



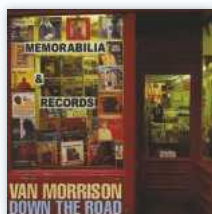
BACK ON TOP

A mix of Van ordinaire and vintage sparkle. *The Philosopher's Stone* and *In The Midnight* are premier cru, but there's a touch of plonk about the rest.



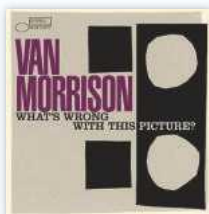
YOU WIN AGAIN

A rough and ready bunch of first-take rockabilly covers with Linda Gail Lewis on vocals and piano and backed by Welsh pub rock band The Red Hot Pokers.



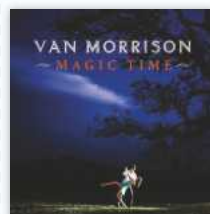
DOWN THE ROAD

The ripe sound of a man coming to terms with his own mortality on songs *Meet Me In The Indian Summer* and *The Beauty Of The Days Gone By*.



WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

A move to the Blue Note label prompted a set of dinner jazz, swing and sinuous jazz-funk featuring Acker Bilk on clarinet.



MAGIC TIME

In complete mastery of his voice as he shifts the gears through lounge crooner, blues shouter, Celtic dreamer, jazz balladeer and big-band swinger.



PAY THE DEVIL

Old-school twang as Van goes country with waltzing fiddle, weeping pedal steel and Nashville strings on songs by Hank Williams, Merle Haggard et al.



Van continues to tour and produce music

L. Ron Hubbard, and also included a lyrical tribute to the metaphysical poet John Donne. After a run of 14 albums in as many years, it was his final record for Warner Brothers, whose president Joe Smith ungraciously described Morrison as "a hateful little guy".

His first release for Polygram was 1985's *A Sense Of Wonder*, which continued his interests in mysticism. It was followed by the rapturous *No Guru, No Method, No Teacher*, which many critics regarded as his best work since *Into The Music* and 1987's exquisitely jazzy *Poetic Champions Compose*.

With its jazzy themes, *Moondance* became Morrison's commercial breakthrough

After came a delightful foray into traditional Irish folk music with *The Chieftains* (which characteristically concluded with a major bust up when they went on tour together), while 1989's *Avalon Sunset* surprised with a duet with Cliff Richard on *Whenever God Shines His Light*. The track gave him his first British chart single since the days of *Them* and the album also included the gorgeous ballad *Have I Told You Lately*, which swiftly became a much-covered standard.

By the nineties, Morrison seemed to have put his quest for spiritual enlightenment to one side. Instead he perfected his musical approach to an elegant glide that was seemingly so effortless that it was unfairly interpreted by some critics as laziness. It was true that there was little new ground being explored, but the quality control remained high and while many of his contemporaries retreated to their country estates, Morrison has remained prolific.

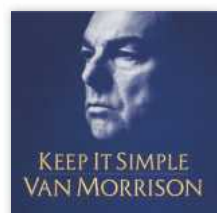
Full force gale

There were seven studio albums in the nineties and there have been 10 more since 2000, plus lounge-jazz collaborations with Georgie Fame and Mose Allison, a skiffle album with Lonnie Donegan and a rockabilly record with Linda Gail Lewis, the sister of Jerry Lee.

Like Bob Dylan, he has also found a sense of renewal in playing live and he continues to gig tirelessly. Portly and invariably dressed in a dark suit, with a hat to conceal his baldness and sporting dark glasses, he cuts a slightly sinister figure on stage, like a charismatic Mafia don. Yet age has not diminished his voice as a rich and expressive instrument.

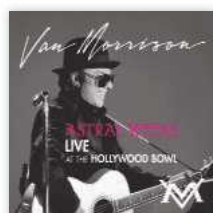
"I am from a bygone era. I don't know if there is any tradition any more," he noted in a rare interview given to mark his 70th birthday. But then, as he once sung, it's too late to stop now... **NW**

2008 ▶ 2009 ▶ 2012 ▶ 2015 ▶ 2016 ▶ 2017 ▶



KEEP IT SIMPLE

The two sides of Van: seasoned jazzier/bluesman (*How Can A Poor Boy?* and *Don't Go To Nightclubs Anymore*) and dreamy poet (*Behind The Ritual*).



ASTRAL WEEKS LIVE AT THE HOLLYWOOD BOWL

Van rejuvenates his masterpiece with an orchestra adding ecstatic layers of grandeur and his extemporised vocals.



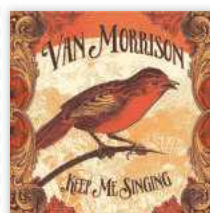
BORN TO SING: NO PLAN B

Morrison as protest singer: warm and jazzy, but with some hard-hitting lyrics in the velvet glove as he rails against capitalism and cusses the banks.



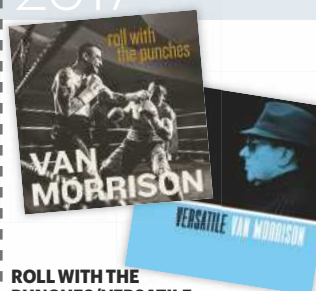
DUETS: RE-WORKING THE CATALOGUE

16 songs reworked as duets. Stand outs include Mick Hucknall on *Streets Of Arklow* and Mark Knopfler on *Irish Heartbeat*.



KEEP ME SINGING

A mellow set of quiet ballads and smooth pop that may lack the fire and intensity of old, but makes up for it with grace and elegance.



ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES/VERSATILE

Two albums of mostly blues and R&B covers paying homage to his musical heroes, with Jeff Beck sparring on guitar.

Amplifiers with elegance and finesse



Integrated amplifiers clockwise from top left: Hegel H590, Norma Audio REVO IPA-140, Audio Analogue Puccini Anniversary, Norma Audio REVO IPA-70B, Audio Analogue Maestro Anniversary

Three amplifier manufacturers that offer a more refined sound than many. A common aim to produce a more natural sound, with accurate tonal balance, large holographic sound pictures, and fast dynamics to recreate music of all genres as honestly as the artists intended.

Audio Analogue have recently redesigned several of their long-standing products with new dual mono circuitry, using higher grade components and stylish cabinets. This new anniversary range consists of two integrated stereo amplifiers called Puccini and Maestro which have a more refined, detailed sound within a large sound stage.

Hegel Music Systems are known for producing high-end quality electronics at realistic prices. Their unique SoundEngine technology reduces the noise floor and distortions producing a clean, organic sound. A very focused range of products which include four integrated amplifiers and two pre-power amplifier combinations. All integrated amplifiers include sophisticated DAC designs.

Norma Audio have dual mono designs including two transformers in some models, very high capacitance power supplies reproducing speed and transients accurately with finesse. The rigid cabinets have slight curves to the side, an elegant design feature. The range consists of two integrated stereo amplifiers, pre- and power amps, both stereo and mono designs.

Raiders of the pop charts

As one of the most watched videos in the UK in 2017, Dua Lipa's *New Rules* is among the catalysts for the way the UK chart is now compiled. **Lee Dunkley** explains all

Anyone that grew up listening to the countdown of the best-selling singles on Radio 1 on a Sunday evening in the seventies and eighties will no doubt be wondering about the state of the music industry following the recent news that the UK Top-40 singles chart will now include video streaming as part of its sales figures. It's no secret that even with the increased interest in vinyl, record sales are in catastrophic decline as the way we consume music moves to streaming services and away from buying physical formats.

The way the UK single charts is compiled has changed a lot since it began in 1952. Originally introduced and published by *New Musical Express* (NME) with sales figures gathered from a number of record stores willing to report their best-selling singles, several publications of the day also ran their own charts before the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) was established in 1969 as the first official UK chart.

Listening to the weekly Top 40 was a rite of passage for any self-respecting teenager. It was pretty much the only way to keep up with the music trends of the time, and I followed it religiously to hear my favourite artists.

While the idea of crouching by the radio listening to the run-down with my finger hovering over the pause button of my cassette recorder is a cherished memory that kick

started my love affair with music, I can't help but wonder if it is still all that relevant, and if today's music fans are influenced

It could be that artists with the most lavish videos get the most views

in the slightest by the runners and riders in the charts?

Since the nineties, the way that we consume music has changed irreversibly and both the charts and industry have had to adapt to our constantly evolving buying habits. It weathered the transition through the multi-format wars of the nineties, embraced the start of the non-physical revolution with the introduction of downloads by the mid-2000s, before incorporating music streams in 2014.

The inclusion of download sales to the singles chart was a major shift when it was introduced in 2005. For a chart that had been based on physical sales until this point, it was controversial to acknowledge non-physical sales figures from these new download sites. But in spite of the emergence of lossless and hi-res file formats since then, downloads haven't stood the test of time and are now in a steady decline. As if to emphasise the state of the market, Technics Tracks pulled the plug in 2018 and closed the doors on its download music service for good – although

the site says that existing members can still access content from the platform through the digital music and radio services of 7digital.

The music chart clearly wants to remain relevant, but it's a fractured market. It introduced a weekly vinyl

album sales chart in 2015 following the growing interest and upturn in LP sales. While this was a milestone for fans of the analogue format, most of today's music listeners consume individual tracks rather than taking in an entire album. Like it or not, streaming seems to be the way most of us are heading, with artist-curated playlists and a lucky dip approach to what gets played next as our streaming service of choice devises intelligent playlists using complex algorithms that take into consideration what we've previously listened to.

Magic numbers

The move to include video streams in the music charts is in response to streaming services from Apple Music, Spotify, Youtube and Tidal adding video content to their platforms. As with audio streams, where a specific number of listens count as one sale (currently 100 subscription streams or 600 free ad-supported streams), the same formula will now be applied to official video content.

For a modern music artist, video is increasingly part of the creative process and many have a highly developed visual theme running through their music. But to anyone that grew up before the arrival of MTV, where the music and not the 'visual package' was what mattered, this may seem a step too far.

When you consider that artist music videos on Youtube can exceed 2 billion views, it's easy to see the potential enthusiasm from a floundering music industry, which has embraced the chart changes with open arms. And with around 40 percent of all music streaming in the UK taking place on Youtube, it could be that artists with the most lavish videos get the largest number of views. The irony is that this potentially moves the emphasis of an artist's creative output towards the visual elements and ultimately away from the music itself... ●



Dua Lipa's *New Rules* has been watched over 1 billion times on Youtube



LEE DUNKLEY
Top of the pops



Vigilante man

A reluctant performer that “touches” his guitar rather than “strangle it”, it’s time to honour the man responsible for teaching Keith Richards how to play open G tuning, the unmistakable Ry Cooder

1970	1972	1972	1974	1976
 <p>RY COODER</p> <p>RY COODER</p> <p>the syncopated playing, brilliant slide work and imaginative arrangements in a bunch of venerable country blues tunes mark him out as a master, even at the tender age of 23.</p>	 <p>INTO THE PURPLE VALLEY</p> <p>From the evocative cover art to the phenomenal playing, Cooder's first great classic, loosely themed around the music of the Dust Bowl era with a couple of later covers of songs by Johnny Cash and The Drifters.</p>	 <p>BOOMER'S STORY</p> <p>Another set of classic Americana tunes, comprising rediscovered and neglected songs by various blues and R&B heroes – and one of his finest ever slide guitar solos on <i>Dark End Of The Street</i>.</p>	 <p>PARADISE AND LUNCH</p> <p>More gold mining of ancient blues and folk idioms, plus contemporary songs by the likes of Bobby Womack, Burt Bacharach and Little Milton. The material could not be more eclectic if it tried.</p>	 <p>CHICKEN SKIN MUSIC</p> <p>A multi-cultural landmark. Bookended by two Leadbelly songs, Hawaiian and Tex-Mex flavours mingle with rock, soul, blues and gospel. The highlight is the call-and-response vocals of <i>Smack Dab In The Middle</i>.</p>

When it comes to polls of the world's all-time great guitar heroes, alongside obvious grandstanding contenders as Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, the more discrete name of Ry Cooder will always be there. There's nothing flashy about Cooder's guitar playing and no gimmicky effects. His trademarks are restraint, subtlety and emotional nuance, allied to a masterful technique and an ability to pack more sinew into a few understated notes than the bombastic arpeggios of any of his peers.

If you polled his fellow musicians, it's highly possible he would come out as number one: the guitarist's guitarist, who – in the words of the veteran drummer Jim Keltner who has played with him since the seventies – knows how “to touch the instrument rather than strangle it or manhandle it.”

Never one to follow fad or fashion, Cooder's career has been driven by a passionate desire to revivify traditional music making as a living and dynamic force in an increasingly deracinated digital world.

Bop till you drop

Since his debut solo album in 1970, he has seldom dealt in the currency of hit records. Discomfited by the spotlight, his distaste for showmanship means he's a reluctant stage performer and a stranger to self-promotion. Yet no popular musician has a broader or deeper catalogue. There are plenty of guitarists who rock. But with his innate sense of swing and syncopation, there's nobody who can roll quite like Cooder.

He once described his guitar groove as “some kind of steam device gone out of control”. You know what he means. Yet it's hard to think of any guitarist who sounds more in command of his instrument.

From his early passions for the blues, indigenous folk music and vintage R&B through his world music adventures and his late flowering as a singular storyteller, every record he has made has taken the listener on a journey, opening new and often unexpected musical vistas based on his own insatiable

musical curiosity. “Prospecting,” he called it, like an old-timer panning for rhythmic gold.

The New York Times likened him to “a sharp-eared extra-terrestrial on a lifelong voyage of discovery, exploring all corners of the musical planet.” Once he masters something, he always wants to move on to the next musical lesson. “Someone once asked me what influenced my sound and I had to say ‘every record I have ever listened to!’” he once declared.

Born in March 1947 in Los Angeles, he got his first guitar when he was four. He was lying in bed recuperating from a childhood accident that cost him the sight in his left eye.

“I took Ry Cooder for everything I could get,” The Rolling Stones’ Keith Richards confessed

“The man who brought it over was a violinist who was a friend of my parents,” he recalled. “He comes into the bedroom and he sets this thing down on my stomach and he strums the strings... and that was all you need to know. I couldn't tell you what I thought, but I can remember the feeling of it.” The moment of discovery mixed with promise and mystery somehow seems to encapsulate the aesthetic that drove Cooder's career.

He learned to play the acoustic country blues from one of the original finger-picking masters in Reverend Gary Davis, whom he met as an old man who had been rediscovered during the sixties folk-blues revival and was

enjoying a late flowering in the folk clubs of Los Angeles. But he was equally adept on an electric guitar and by the age of 17 he was backing the singer Jackie DeShannon.

In 1965, he formed Rising Sons with bluesman Taj Mahal and, when the group broke up, joined Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band, contributing some stellar slide guitar work to the good Captain's extraordinary debut album, *Safe As Milk*.

Cooder judged Beefheart a maverick genius, but couldn't deal with his weirdness and moved on to become a session guitarist. Able to play in any style and with the mandolin and various other stringed instruments in his arsenal he was in high demand and went on to grace classic albums by the likes of Randy Newman, Little Feat, Eric Clapton, Neil Young and Van Morrison.

There were even sessions with The Monkees, but his most notable gig came with The Rolling Stones. Hired as a session guitarist during the recording of *Let It Bleed*, he taught Keith Richards how to play in an open G tuning and allegedly showed him the riff that became *Honky Tonk Women*.

The guitar style came to define the Stones' sound from *Brown Sugar* to *Start Me Up*, prompting NME journalist Nick Kent to



1977



SHOW TIME

Recorded over two nights in San Francisco, a documentation of the Chicken Skin Revue, the best band Cooder assembled on stage, featuring a soul-gospel trio on backing vocals and Flaco Jiménez on accordion.

1978



JAZZ

Ry's homage to Dixieland, from antique spirituals on to ragtime, Jelly Roll Morton and Bix Beiderbecke. Joseph Byrd is on hand to help out with the labour-of-love arrangements and conducting duties.

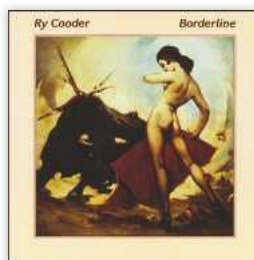
1979



BOP TILL YOU DROP

Should have been his 'hit' album – but how often do good taste and commercial success fail to align? That it was the world's first digitally recorded album is odd, given that Cooder regards hi-tech as the devil's work.

1980



BORDERLINE

Covers of R&B numbers by the likes of Wilson Pickett mingle with Tex-Mex flavours and a couple of songs written by John Hiatt, with whom Cooder would later hook up briefly in the band Little Village.

1982



THE SLIDE AREA

From the funk-fuelled opener to covers of songs by Bob Dylan, Curtis Mayfield and Carl Perkins, a groove-laden album full of memorable slide guitar and Cooder sounding increasingly confident as a vocalist.

MUSIC LEGENDS

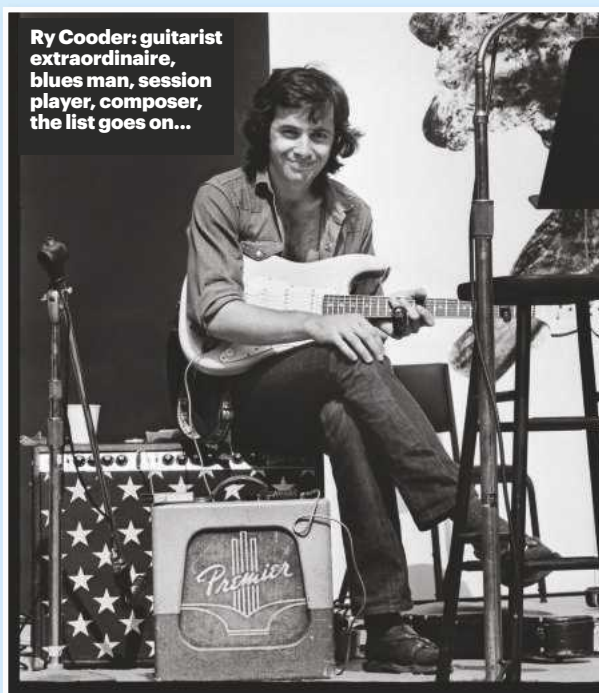
COODER

suggest that rock guitar playing is predicated on just two basic templates: There's the one in normal tuning, which is the Chuck Berry stuff. And there's the one in open G, which is what Ry Cooder taught Keith Richards." "I took Ry Cooder for everything I could get," Richards confessed. "I heard those things he played and I was amazed".

Chicken skin music

He also played slide guitar on Jagger's solo single, *Memo From Turner* from the soundtrack of the film *Performance* and was tipped as a replacement for Brian Jones when he left the Stones in 1969. The job went instead to Mick Taylor and although Cooder felt he had been used, he subsequently came to believe he had been handed a lucky escape. Temperamentally he and the swaggering, drug-saturated *demi-monde* of the Stones were aeons apart. His own solo albums found him digging deep into the roots of rock and blues, resurrecting and rearranging obscure country blues tunes and Depression-era folk numbers and mixing calypsos and Tex-Mex tropes with gospel, R&B, and early rock and roll classics. There were Civil War camp songs, drifter and cowboy songs, miner's songs, work songs, surf songs, jukebox songs, dance hall songs and protest songs. He even explored the roots of jazz, vaudeville, ragtime and bop. From it all he fashioned a highly personal and uniquely singular musical vision.

His complete mastery of blues styles was evident on his 1970 solo debut. The material spanned six decades, sourced from the likes of Woody Guthrie, Blind Blake and Leadbelly, plus Blind Willie Johnson's *Dark Was The Night (Cold Was the Ground)* a tune that would later form the basis of his haunting soundtrack to Wim Wenders' film *Paris, Texas*. All were played with a startling combination of authenticity, virtuosity and ingenuity that was all his own and his spellbinding version



Ry Cooder: guitarist extraordinaire, blues man, session player, composer, the list goes on...

He learned to play the acoustic country blues from finger-picking master Rev Gary Davis

of Sleepy John Estes' *Goin' To Brownsville* led to Bob Dylan turning up at Cooder's house in Santa Monica and asking to be shown how to play the tune.

Three more albums in similar but ever more eclectic style followed, blending country blues with R&B, folk and gospel plus a few rock riffs thrown in for good measure. Try the triumphant version of The Drifters' *Money Honey* on *Into The Purple Valley*, the spine-tingling version of James Carr's *Dark End Of The Street* on *Boomer's Story* or the joyous take on Bobby Womack's *It's All Over Now* on *Paradise & Lunch* – and marvel.

Even better was to come with 1976's *Chicken Skin Music*, a landmark album that marked the start of Cooder's interest in world music and included collaborations with Tex-Mex accordionist Flaco Jiménez and Hawaiian music legend Gabby Pahinui.

He followed it with *Jazz*, an album that delved back to its origins as dance music before it became a beard-stroking, intellectual pastime. Then came 1979's *Bop Till You Drop*, which seemed like a reluctant bid for pop stardom under pressure from Warner Brothers looking to recoup some of their investment in him.

The record included a version of Elvis Presley's *Little Sister*, which was as close as he has ever come to a hit single but when the parent album failed to crack even the top 50, Cooder retreated to composing roots-and-noir movie scores, including not only *Paris, Texas*, but no fewer than eight Walter Hill films, among them *The Long Riders*,

Southern Comfort, *Crossroads* and *Trespass*. Like everything else he's ever done, Cooder's approach to film music was highly original. "Ry doesn't underscore the dramatic moment in the traditional sense of Hollywood, as much as he fills the environment and the atmosphere," Hill noted.

Yet by the late eighties, Cooder felt that he had hit a musical brick wall. *Get Rhythm*, which was released in 1987, to be his final solo album for 18 years. In a chronic crisis of confidence, he virtually disowned his entire back catalogue and complained that he felt his work had "no context".

"I couldn't make headway," he said. "Nobody bought the records, I didn't like 'em particularly and it was too hard to keep coming up with this stuff that nobody seemed to care about."

Touring was even worse: "I just couldn't stand it. I'd find myself in strange towns and

Picture credit: Susan Titeiman

1987



GET RHYTHM

Cooder bops, rocks and rolls in songs by Johnny Cash and Elvis, reinvents a Chuck Berry song as acoustic country blues, essays some more experimental rhythms in *Low-Commotion* and throws in Tex-Mex touches and a stonking boogie or two.

1993



MEETING BY THE RIVER (with VM Bhatt)

These spontaneous duets between Cooder's bottleneck guitar playing and Bhatt's hybrid Indian stringed instrument were improvised. Yet it sounds as if they've been playing together for years.

1994



TALKING TIMBUKTU (with Ali Farka Touré)

An inspired summit meeting between Cooder and West Africa's most revered guitarist. Both play with eloquence and ease on an album that started a trend for collaborations between African and US bluesmen.

1997



BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB

A majestic and nostalgic showcase of traditional Cuban music with Cooder as facilitator coaxing the performances of a lifetime out of a bunch of Havana's finest, many of whom had come out of retirement.

2003



MAMBO SINUENDO (with Manuel Galbán)

An overlooked instrumental gem. Full of flavour and character, Galbán's twang and Ry's sophistication create a unique Cuban pop-jazz-lounge hybrid that arguably no two other guitarists on earth could have invented.

ask, 'What am I doing here?' This weird feeling of being in the wrong place – so I said 'alright, I quit'."

For one of the world's most revered guitarists to find himself feeling quite so disconnected from his art was extraordinary. He didn't turn to religion, as the likes of Cat Stevens and Bob Dylan had done when their careers reached a similar crossroads. Yet redemption was at hand. Immersing himself in world music, Cooder was thrilled to rediscover the aesthetic purity and emotional honesty which he had so admired in the pre-war, pre-rock and roll music of America's blues and folk traditions.

He began his global adventures with VM Bhatt, a master on the Mohan Veena, an Indian stringed instrument played with a metal slide, which meshed magically with his guitar picking. They met for the first time an hour before they began recording, but the unrehearsed, improvised set was exquisite and won a Grammy award.

Let's have a ball

Next up was an album of guitar duets with the West African maestro Ali Farka Touré, which won another Grammy. Then came the historic trip to Cuba that yielded the incredible *Buena Vista Social Club*.

Serving as producer and adding throaty guitar licks which he modestly buried deep in the mix, he smartly pushed the veteran Cuban musicians, several of whom were in their eighties, into the limelight. "Something very special took place and I was lucky and blessed to be a part in it," he said.

He was fined \$100,000 by the State Department for breaching the US embargo with Cuba, but it was a small price to pay. *Buena Vista Social Club* sold eight million copies worldwide, by far the biggest commercial success of Cooder's career and the best-selling world music album of all time.

When he told his old friend Wim Wenders about the project, an award-winning film followed, too. With an Oscar and a Grammy on the mantelpiece, President Bill Clinton not



Cooder is a respected movie soundtrack composer, most notably on *Paris, Texas*

only felt obliged to give him an official 'pardon' but exempted him from the ban, which allowed him to return to Cuba.

Further Havana adventures followed, including a superb album of twanging guitar duets with the Afro-Cuban guitarist Manuel Galbán, but by 2005 the death of many of the ageing *Buena Vista* stars had brought that particular journey to its natural end.

Approaching 60, Cooder hadn't released a solo cut in almost two decades and had barely written a song in his entire career, so it was both a bold and surprising decision when he decided to relaunch himself as a contemporary storyteller.

Where or why he had been hiding his songwriting skills is a mystery, for 2005's *Chávez Ravine* revealed him to be a quite brilliant troubadour with a uniquely appealing way of telling a story.

Using real and imagined historical characters, he wove a compelling narrative of corruption and greed and its victims in a long-bulldozed Mexican community, delivered in a resonant voice rich with a character that had never previously even been hinted at. "Here is some music for a place you don't know, up a road you don't go, where the sidewalk ends," he declared.



The album turned out to be the first instalment in a Californian storytelling trilogy and was followed by *My Name Is Buddy* and *I, Flathead*, the latter accompanied by a 95-page novella in which he created a world where "strange people are the norm." Cooder, it seemed, had turned into rock and roll's answer to Garrison Keillor or a modern-day Uncle Remus.

He followed this with a brace of albums made up of topical and protest songs on which he metamorphosed into a Woody Guthrie for the 21st century, with songs about the global economic crash and the venality of American politicians.

Guitarist extraordinaire, blues man, session player, solo artist, movie composer, world music adventurer, storyteller, folk singer and protest singer, Cooder is now in his seventies and it has been a few years since his last album. But don't bet against the old master having a further surprise or two up his eclectic musical sleeve before he's done. **NW**

2005	2007	2008	2011	2012	2013
<p>CHÁVEZ RAVINE a novella by Ry Cooder</p>	<p>My Name Is Buddy written by Ry Cooder</p>	<p>I, FLATHEAD Ry Cooder</p>	<p>ry cooder PULL UP SOME DUST AND SIT DOWN</p>	<p>RY COODER ELECTION SPECIAL</p>	<p>RYCOODER Corridos Famosos LIVE AND IN - SEPTEMBER 2013 SAN FRANCISCO</p>
<p>CHÁVEZ RAVINE Eighteen years after his last solo album, Cooder turned storyteller on a concept album that musically covers the water front, from Latin swing to finger-popping rumba via a Costa Rican folk song and Los Lobos-styled roots-rock.</p>	<p>MY NAME IS BUDDY Warming to his new role, Cooder offers a smart, sly and affectionate look at Depression-era America, creating his own folk tales with old-timey string band music, blues, bluegrass, country, polka, jazz and Mexican corridos.</p>	<p>I, FLATHEAD His third instalment of the California trilogy required a 95-page book to explain the narrative intricacies. Musically the 14 original tunes span rockabilly, blues, country, Western swing, mariachi and much else besides.</p>	<p>PULL UP SOME DUST AND SIT DOWN Cooder turns social commentator sounding like a cross between Woody Guthrie and Tom Waits on a collection of songs full of coruscating wit and political anger at the state of modern America.</p>	<p>ELECTION SPECIAL Accompanied by his son Joachim on percussion, Ry lays into the American political establishment with zeal. The songs were prompted by the 2012 US election, but in the age of Trump arguably sound more relevant than ever.</p>	<p>LIVE AT THE GREAT AMERICAN MUSIC HALL, SAN FRANCISCO (with Corridos Famosos) A rare late-period Cooder live performance on a dozen songs that range from blues and folk standards through to original songs from <i>Pull Up Some Dust And Sit Down</i>.</p>

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New revolution

As **David Price** pens a paean of praise for his new favourite high-end turntable, Technics' SL-1000R, he wonders why you'd want to spend more on a vinyl spinner

As someone that has attended Munich's High End show (11-13 May) every year for the last 15 years, it's fascinating to watch fashions come and go. I've seen the weird and wonderful wares on display reflect the switch from CD to streaming alongside the sharp rise and then gradual decline of valve amplifiers. Nearly a decade ago, the show also had a surfeit of massive horn loudspeakers, which seems to have fallen off recently – and now the headphone craze is everywhere. Throughout, however, one trend has been most evident – high-end turntables.

I'm rather conflicted by this. On one level, I'm delighted. I think back to the early nineties when everyone was throwing their record collections into the nearest skip. The me of 25 years ago would have been over the moon to find out what's now happening with my beloved format. Yet at the same time, it strikes me that many brands are milking the so-called vinyl revival for all it is worth to seduce naive fans into parting with their cash.

I suppose if you've got £50,000 to spend on a symphony of acrylic, rare wood and/or anodised aluminium – or indeed glass, copper, brass, carbon fibre or whatever else happens to be fashionable at any given time – then perhaps you don't need my sympathy. But I can't help but think it's possible to play vinyl to an extremely high standard by spending under £5,000 on the likes of a

It is very hard to see how the SL-1000R/SP-10R can be improved upon

Michell Orbe with suitable tonearm and cartridge. Indeed, if you're really going to pull all the stops out, then the new

Technics SL-1000R is pretty much the last word on the subject. I had the pleasure of reviewing it for *HFC's* sister publication, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* in the June issue – and have come to the conclusion it makes it impossible for anything else more expensive to justify its existence.

The SL-1000R is the turntable package version of the new SP-10R, which is itself Technics' reinvention of the classic SP-10/III motor unit. Spending £20,000 on it, complete with your own choice of cartridge – the Lyra Etna SL would be mine – buys you what is surely the best turntable in the world. Given that a turntable's job is to go round at the correct speed as noiselessly as possible, there is literally no other deck on the planet that betters it. Hearing the Technics' lack of speed instability and quietness is staggering – it's like cleaning a dirty lens or switching on the light compared with your average high-end deck. It makes every belt-drive turntable I have



ever heard, sound like a vague, woolly, tremulous thing that's riddled with noise.

In a sense, we shouldn't be surprised that a £20,000 deck is better than a £5,000 one – but the real shock is how it beats £100,000 designs. I can't see how anyone can justify spending so much on a turntable now, if all you want is performance. From an engineering standpoint, it is really hard to see how the new Technics SL-1000R/SP-10R can be improved upon. Its motor is surely the best ever fitted to a vinyl spinner, as the measurements attest – it has wow and flutter pretty much below measurable limits, and supremely low rumble. Every record I audition on it seems to dissolve, letting the music flood forth regardless of pressing quality or indeed how well the performance was recorded or mastered.

Raising the bar

What is really interesting is that – despite its amazing measured performance – it doesn't sound sterile or 'technical'. It is anything but. How then can all these ultra-high-end decks – with their fancy pendulums, mass stabilisers, vast plinths and bases, triple belt-drive systems, etc. – justify their position, other than as expensive and very pretty living room ornaments?

As someone that owns several high-end Japanese direct drives, and indeed several high-end British ones, all I can say is that the Technics SL-1000R is a game-changer. It rather reminds me of when Honda introduced the NSX supercar in the early nineties. It was Japanese and lacked the romance of Ferrari and Lamborghini, but was better engineered, far more reliable and usable, and trounced them on performance for half the price. The new Technics SL-1000R is so good that I'm beginning to wonder if at the next Munich Show, I'll discover that many 'boutique' turntable makers will have thrown in the towel ●

Bow down before the new king of high-end vinyl spinners



DAVID PRICE
Spin doctor

DO RIGHT WOMAN

In another year of musical heroes passing, few will be missed more than the Queen of Soul herself... Aretha Franklin

When Atlantic Records signed Aretha Franklin in 1967, her career was a story of promise and potential that had never been quite fulfilled. At 24 she had already been singing professionally for almost a decade, first as a gospel singer and then in a secular vein as a recording artist for Columbia Records, where the veteran producer John Hammond – who discovered Billie Holiday and Count Basie – had seemed uncertain what to do with her already peerless voice. Nine albums recorded for the label between 1961 and 1966 found her singing jazz, easy listening and pop. She could sing all of them, of course, but it wasn't what she was best at and nothing really stuck. Eventually Columbia gave up and dropped Franklin. It was the best thing that ever happened to her. Atlantic, her new label, was steeped in black music with a 20-year history in recording artists such as Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, Solomon Burke and Ben E King and also distributed the Stax label, whose roster included soul greats Otis Redding and Wilson Pickett.

On signing Franklin, the first act of Atlantic's in-house producer, Jerry Wexler, was to send her in January 1967 to record down South, where he felt her



1961	1962	1962	1963	1964	1964
ARETHA: WITH THE RAY BRYANT COMBO At 18, her voice is already impressive but the material and the supper-club jazz arrangements do her no favours.	THE ELECTRIFYING ARETHA FRANKLIN Much as one would like to Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive, it's not easy on another underwhelming cabaret-style set.	THE TENDER, THE MOVING, THE SWINGING ARETHA FRANKLIN Billie Holiday's <i>God Bless The Child</i> is beautiful and the more upbeat material shows growing assurance.	LAUGHING ON THE OUTSIDE Another set of jazz and pop standards with a terrific version of the classic <i>Skylark</i> as the album's stand out.	UNFORGETTABLE: A TRIBUTE TO DINAH WASHINGTON Washington was a friend of Aretha's father and this tribute delivers 10 of her best-known songs.	RUNNIN' OUT OF FOOLS Less jazzy and more pop, as Aretha covers recent hits such as <i>Mockingbird</i> , <i>My Guy</i> , <i>Walk On By</i> and even <i>The Shoop Shoop Song (It's In His Kiss)</i> .

MUSIC LEGENDS ARETHA FRANKLIN

1965	1966	1967	1967	1967	1968
					
YEAH!!! A stylish set accompanied by a jazz quartet recorded in Columbia's Manhattan studio, but bizarrely overdubbed so that it sounds like a live set.	SOUL SISTER Jazz with a soulful twist, but the choice of material – from Paul Robeson's <i>O' Man River</i> to Al Jolson's <i>Swanee</i> – proves dull and ultimately unchallenging.	TAKE IT LIKE YOU GIVE IT The last of her nine albums for Columbia – and you can almost hear just how much she's straining at the leash in anticipation of emancipation.	I NEVER LOVED A MAN THE WAY I LOVE YOU The legend starts here as she gets the material her voice deserved, from the title track to <i>Respect</i> and the brilliant <i>Dr Feelgood</i> .	ARETHA ARRIVES Not the follow-up her Atlantic debut deserved, but <i>Baby I Love You</i> and her rousing versions of <i>Satisfaction</i> and <i>Never Let Me Go</i> are highlights.	LADY SOUL Genius led by two of her greatest singles in (<i>You Make Me Feel Like</i>) <i>A Natural Woman</i> and <i>Chain Of Fools</i> , plus a majestic <i>People Get Ready</i> .

artistry could blossom naturally via a re-engagement with the roots of black music. Booking the funkiest studio in the country at FAME in Muscle Shoals, he teamed her with the hottest rhythm section in the business and let her voice and piano lead the session. The plan worked. The result was *I Never Loved A Man (The Way I Love You)*.

With a powder-keg vocal performance that sent shivers down the spine, it was the only song she ever recorded at Muscle Shoals – but it was the pivotal moment in Franklin's career and heralded the start of a red-hot streak that led to her coronation as the Queen of Soul.

She followed with an unforgettable stream of near-perfect hits that included *Respect*, *I Never Loved A Man*, *Chain Of Fools*, *I Say A Little Prayer*, *Rock Steady*, *Think* and her sublime take on Carole King's *A Natural Woman*. All recorded between 1967 and 1971, as a body of work it represents one of the towering pinnacles of 20th-century popular music and came to define the art of soul singing.

Several of her songs became feminist and civil rights anthems, although, more than that, they transcended gender and race to become celebrations of shared humanity.

Perhaps the most potent of all was her rearrangement of Otis Redding's *Respect*. Redding had recorded the song as a plea. Franklin transformed it into both a demand and a shout of impending triumph as she

added her own brilliant, semi-improvised touches, such as the chorus in which she emphatically spelt out letter-by-letter “R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me” and the supercharged “Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me” refrain.

In the studio her delivery was so monumental that when she finished recording the vocal, her backing musicians stood up and applauded. It was an unprecedented show of appreciation by seen-it-all sessioners.

As she sang *A Natural Woman* in Washington in 2015, a tear was seen to roll down Obama's cheek

Not far behind in intensity was *Think*, which she co-wrote with first husband Ted White and which became another civil rights anthem with its volcanic, rising battle cry of “Freedom! Freedom!! Freedom!!! Freedom!!!!”

Respect gave Franklin her first number one. She went on to score 112 singles on the American charts, including 17 in the top 10, making her the most charted female artist in history. She won 18 Grammys, sold more than 80 million records and was the first female performer to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

In later years, her material was not always as strong as the golden run of the late sixties and seventies, but she remained the benchmark by which subsequent female singers were judged, from Whitney to Beyoncé. For all their undoubted qualities, none was ever found to be quite as regal as the original Queen of Soul.

Rock steady

Her voice combined the fervour of gospel, a jazz-like sophistication and an unparalleled emotion that seemed to emanate from deep within her being. She could scald or soothe and sing with a delicate intimacy or a carnal intensity and sometimes with a unique combination of both simultaneously. Whether she was addressing her God or a faithless lover, the potency and exultation were the same.

Transcending musical genre to become a legend in her own lifetime, as a vocal stylist she could sing anything. At the 1998 Grammys, Pavarotti called in sick. Given 20 minutes' notice, Franklin stepped in and delivered a deathless version of *Nessun Dorma* in his stead.

“American history wells up when Aretha sings,” Barack Obama observed when she performed at the Kennedy Centre, Washington in 2015. She sang for at least three other Presidents, too. Jimmy Carter got to his feet and did the White House boogie; Bill Clinton personally asked her to perform at his inauguration; and George W Bush awarded ▶

1968	1969	1970	1970	1972	1973
					
ARETHA NOW <i>Think</i> and <i>I Say A Little Prayer</i> were the big hits on her fourth Atlantic album, but <i>Night Time Is The Right Time</i> and <i>See Saw</i> are every bit as good.	SOUL '69 No big hits but a nice mix of R&B (<i>Bring It On Home To Me</i> and <i>Big Maybelle's Ramblin'</i>) and pop-soul (<i>Elusive Butterfly</i> and <i>Gentle On My Mind</i>).	THIS GIRL'S IN LOVE WITH YOU Proof she could sing anything and make it her own, from <i>Let It Be</i> to <i>Eleanor Rigby</i> via <i>Son Of A Preacher Man</i> .	SPIRIT IN THE DARK The title song, one of her own compositions, was later sampled by Kanye West and the dozen tracks also include three more of her own songs.	YOUNG, GIFTED AND BLACK A Grammy-winning set, led by her peerless version of Nina Simone's title track and including <i>Rock Steady</i> and <i>Day Dreaming</i> .	AMAZING GRACE Aretha goes back to church – the Watts district in LA to be precise – to record what was to become the biggest-selling gospel album ever.

MUSIC LEGENDS

ARETHA FRANKLIN

1973	1974	1974	1975	1977
HEY NOW HEY (THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SKY) Quincy Jones steps in to produce a jazz-soul album, the highlight of which is <i>Angel</i> written by her sister Carolyn.	LET ME IN YOUR LIFE <i>Until You Come Back To Me</i> was the album's big hit, but songs by Bill Withers, Bobby Womack and Leon Russell hit the sweet spot, too.	WITH EVERYTHING I FEEL IN ME Aretha wrote the title track and her sister Carolyn contributed two more, but the inclusion of a brace of Burt Bacharach songs seems like filler.	YOU The end of an era as this is the final album that Jerry Wexler was to produce for her. Classy and highly sophisticated, it lacked a big killer hit.	SWEET PASSION Motown's legendary Lamont Dozier steps in to take over production and write three songs on one of her more disappointing Atlantic albums.

er the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honour. "Aretha is still the best singer in the world, far none. She finds meanings in lyrics that even the composers didn't know they had," Bush declared. Yet it was America's first black president who most eloquently encapsulated the emotional heft of Franklin's spine-tingling voice and her significance as an indomitable icon of black womanhood. As she sang her soulful 1967 hit (*You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman* in Washington in 2015, a tear was seen to roll down Obama's cheek.

Dreamed a dream

Nobody embodies more fully the connection between the African-American spiritual, the blues, R&B, rock and roll – the way that hardship and sorrow were transformed into something full of beauty and vitality and hope," he later wrote.

"When she sits down at a piano and sings *Natural Woman*, she can move me to tears because it captures the fullness of the American experience and the possibility of synthesis, reconciliation, transcendence."

Perhaps inevitably, it took Donald Trump to power the tone of the presidential tributes, declaring: "She worked for me on numerous occasions. She was terrific". She had indeed performed at his casino in Atlantic City, but

his off-key implication provoked a furious backlash. "The Queen of Soul did not work for anyone," one fan rebuked him on Twitter. "What she did do is generously share her voice and her soul with the world."

She was, needless to say, as difficult, demanding, tempestuous and turbulent as any righteous diva has a right to be. Her

With 112 singles in the US charts and 17 in the top 10, she was the most charted female artist ever

biographer David Ritz described a life racked by insecurities and characterised by tantrums, rages and jealousies. "She was afraid she wasn't good enough as a singer, pretty enough as a woman or devoted enough as a mother," her sister and backing singer Carolyn told him. "I don't know what to call it but deep, deep insecurity. Her style was to either drink away the anxiety or, when that stopped working, disappear for a while, find her bearings, and go right back on stage and wear the crown of the imperious diva."

There were missed gigs, walk outs and rows with producers and promoters. Yet her troubled personal life seemed to enhance the

soulful intensity of her voice. "I think of Aretha as Our Lady of Mysterious Sorrows," wrote Wexler, who produced most of her hits during the sixties and seventies. "Her eyes are incredible, luminous eyes covering inexplicable pain. Her depressions could be as deep as the dark sea. I don't pretend to know the sources of her anguish, but anguish surrounds Aretha as surely as the glory of her musical aura."

Son of a preacher man

Aretha Louise Franklin was born 25 March, 1942 in a shack in Memphis, Tennessee. Her mother Barbara sang and played the piano in the Baptist church where her father CL Franklin was a charismatic preacher.

The family moved to Detroit when she was four, but within two years her mother had left due to her husband's infidelity. She died shortly before her daughter's 10th birthday.

Aretha and sisters Erma, and Carolyn, were soon singing in their father's church and with his travelling gospel show. His sermons denouncing segregation earned him a name in the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King and a young Jesse Jackson were family friends. Aretha later sang at King's funeral.

She had no formal musical lessons, but playing by ear mastered the techniques and cadences of gospel piano at a young age. She

1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
MIGHTY FIRE Produced by Curtis Mayfield, who also wrote all but one of the nine songs. The fire sparks nicely in places, but sadly never quite blazes.	LA DIVA Producer Van McCoy (best known for his hit <i>The Hustle</i>) takes Aretha to the disco dance floor with not entirely satisfying results.	ARETHA Her first post-Atlantic album, ranging from deep soul (Otis Redding's <i>I Can't Turn You Loose</i>) to soft-rock (<i>What A Fool Believes</i>).	LOVE ALL THE HURT AWAY Highlights include the title track, a rather lovely duet with George Benson and her cover of Sam & Dave's <i>Hold On! I'm Coming</i> , which won her a Grammy.	JUMP TO IT Classic soul meets 'contemporary urban', courtesy of Luther Vandross' smooth production. The title track was one of her biggest hits of the eighties.

MUSIC LEGENDS

ARETHA FRANKLIN

1983



GET IT RIGHT

Another smooth set with Luther Vandross (who also wrote most of the songs) on production duties. The title track is the best of a mostly lacklustre set.

1985



WHO'S ZOOMIN' WHO?

Patchy attempt to give Aretha a 'younger' sound, but the title track, *Another Night* and *Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves* are fabulous.

1986



ARETHA

An Andy Warhol sleeve, Keith Richards collaborating on *Jumpin' Jack Flash* and a George Michael duet that took her back to number one.

1989



THROUGH THE STORM

More duets with Elton John, Kenny G and Whitney Houston and a gratuitous remake of *Think* on an appealing but somewhat unfocused album.

1991



WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU SWEAT

Duets with Michael McDonald and Luther Vandross. But with every track featuring a different producer, the results are mixed.

was precocious in other ways, too. Despite growing up in the church, she fell pregnant at 13 and named her son Clarence, after her father, who did not chastise her. At 15 she fell pregnant again and gave birth to a second son. Both children were raised by her grandmother Rachel and her older sister as she dropped out of school and became a full-time gospel singer.

A change is gonna come

She made her first recordings aged 15 on an album recorded in churches across America. Three years later, inspired by Sam Cooke who was a friend and had made a similar switch, she informed her father that she wanted to sing secular pop material and duly signed to Columbia Records.

Her six years with Columbia were frustrating and a careless waste of her talent. John Hammond was in his fifties when he signed her, but he still had his finger on the pulse: the same year that Aretha joined the label he also signed a young unknown folk singer called Bob Dylan and would later discover Bruce Springsteen. Yet for some reason, he never worked out how to unleash Franklin's genius and eventually accepted defeat.

"You'll do good things with Aretha," he told Wexler when she left to join Atlantic. "You understand her musically."

Wexler oversaw her golden period and over the next half dozen years there was scarcely a misstep as she sung her heart out with majestic honesty and directness on top quality material backed by the best musicians in the business.

In 1972 she made a superb return to her gospel roots with an album recorded in a Baptist church in the Watts district of Los Angeles and featuring the voices of her father and the noted gospel preacher the Rev James Cleveland. Titled *Amazing Grace*, it sold more

Franklin's voice had an unparalleled emotion that emanated from deep within her being

than 2m copies, making it the most successful gospel album of all time.

A teaming with Quincy Jones produced a patchy album but did include the hit single *Angel*, which was one of her most compelling performances and was co-written by her sister Carolyn. Back with the surefooted Wexler, she had a massive hit with *Until You Come Back To Me*, written by Stevie Wonder. Two years later a collaboration with Curtis Mayfield delivered the last of her Atlantic successes, *Something He*

Can Feel. She left the label in 1979 after an ill-advised disco-styled album, *La Diva*.

After joining Arista, there were fresh hits with *Jump To It* and *Who's Zoomin' Who?*, a second gospel album featuring her sisters, and successful attempts to update her sound via duets with George Benson (*Love All The Hurt Away*), Annie Lennox (*Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves*), George Michael (*I Knew You Were Waiting*), Elton John (*Through the Storm*) and Whitney Houston (*It Isn't, It Wasn't, It Ain't Never Gonna Be*). There was even a hip-hop makeover via collaborations with Lauryn Hill and Puff Daddy.

A natural woman

She made her last recording, a 'diva covers' album, in 2014, and announced her retirement from touring three years later. Throughout it all, the voice continued to sing out with an unrivalled soulfulness. "I don't care what they say about Aretha," the late Billy Preston observed. "She can sing all kinds of jive-ass songs that are beneath her. She can go into her diva act and turn off the world. But on any given night, when that lady gets her body and soul all over some righteous song, she'll scare the s**t out of you. And you'll know – you'll swear – that she's still the best singer this f***ed-up country has ever produced." **NW**

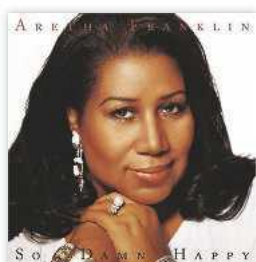
1998



A ROSE IS STILL A ROSE

Aretha reinvented, but this time as the queen of hip-hop? Perhaps not a great decision, but the contributions of Lauryn Hill and Puff Daddy inject a new energy.

2003



SO DAMN HAPPY

A likeable attempt to recapture the classic R&B feel of her golden era, that happily eschews guest rappers and trendy production techniques.

2008



THIS CHRISTMAS, ARETHA

Another golden opportunity is missed by a mile. Instead of recording duds like *Ave Maria* and *Silent Night*, she surely should have made a full-on Christmas gospel album...

2011



ARETHA: A WOMAN FALLING OUT OF LOVE

It took Aretha five years to find a distributor for this set, which was recorded in Detroit in 2006. The best one can say is that the voice was still regal, at least...

2014



ARETHA FRANKLIN SINGS THE GREAT DIVA CLASSICS

High-quality if over-familiar material as she covers Adele, Streisand, Alicia Keys and Gloria Gaynor – but it's not really how you want to remember her.

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- 8.6" aluminium tonearm with sapphire bearings
- Pre-adjusted tracking force and anti-skating force
- Ortofon OM 5E cartridge included
- Dust cover included
- Available in High-Gloss Black, Red or White
- Optionally available with matching Speaker Box 5 speakers

At your service

There was a time when general regular maintenance of your car was essential for a continued quality performance. **Chris Ward** suggests turntables aren't any different

We all know we should service older cars on a regular basis. Oil becomes dark and thick, brake fluid needs topping up, coolant needs changing and tyres go bald. It's a complex machine with moving parts that are designed to wear. Forget to service a vehicle and you'll end up with poorer performance or worse still a breakdown. So, how did we get so lazy with turntables? Across the land turntables are crying out for some basic servicing, but years pass without any TLC. Maybe any decline is so gradual that we don't perceive the drop in performance until something forces more drastic intervention. While the vinyl revival is great, surely we may need a 'servicing' revival to match it?

Back in the seventies, the heyday of the turntable, the world was more analogue and maintainable. There was an expectation that ownership and maintenance came hand in hand. I can still recall topping up the battery acid in my Mini or de-scaling a kettle with vinegar. Similarly, owning a turntable was tweeky. Alignments, overhangs and downforce needed checking regularly and cartridges required constant cleaning due to dust build up caused by the powerful static generated from my viscose flares and bri-nylon tank top. To own a turntable was to buy in to a servicing regime.

After the oil change there was more insight, detail and soundstage depth

responsibility to maintain? Open the bonnet of a modern car and one is invariably greeted by a vast plastic engine cover emblazoned with a logo and a warning you are about to invalidate any warranty, simply by looking at it.

Fortunately, the average classic turntable is an eminently understandable piece of engineering that expects ongoing love. With this in mind I visited Mark Baker at Origin Live who summed this issue up succinctly: "There must be thousands of Linn LP12s and other fine turntables out there that could be utterly transformed with an oil and belt change". As I own a neglected LP12 Sondek, I left with a new drive belt and phial of oil to test his theory.

There are vociferous online forums dedicated to heated arguments around correct Linn bearing oil viscosities, so I tread lightly here, but I know antique, crude gloop when I extract it. It's possible the previous owner may have resorted to Marmite when the seventies oil crisis hit. Re-filling the bearing housing with Origin Live's oil re-awakened waves of hands-on, fettling nostalgia. Seeing the sub-platter gently sink, displacing a little excess lubricant, suggested



an important tolerance was at last reset. Listening to this upgrade was a revelation. It was akin to sensitive cleaning of an old master painting. Gone was an artificial, treacly warmth, replaced by a new layer of fresh, colourful insight from the groove. Not all may favour this extra information. There are plenty that dislike the brighter, restored frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, but I sense Michelangelo would prefer that we see his artisan skill rather than centuries of revered oxidisation and grime. I accept there is a balance, as the Linn LP12 is a perfect example of a very complex ecosystem of subtle vibrations and resonances that net out to a mellifluous whole that is highly communicative and 'right'. But extra musical insight surely cannot be sacrificed for the sake of a simpler version of the truth? There was patently more insight and detail after the oil change that created far greater soundstage depth and a more realistic 'air' around instruments.

Belt up

Replacing the LP12 drive belt was another 'night and day' adjustment. Origin Live belts are formed from a thin strip of a secretive material joined into a continuous band and specifiable to the millimetre. The outgoing belt may have been an original, but I felt it had deteriorated to provide less support and potentially too much elasticity. Again, this is a sensitive matter for LP12 aficionados, but after a suitable run-in the new belt gave a far more propulsive and dynamic performance. Bass in particular was cleaner and more agile, while timing felt tighter with transients better defined. Some might prefer the original belt as it was very relaxed and forgiving, but possibly in the same way: a Citroën 2CV might insulate one from a French cobble road, but couldn't be described as a driver's car.

So, before you spend mega bucks on major upgrades, invest in the oil and rubber markets! MOT your turntable. You may be startled to realise you don't need a new cartridge, phono stage or amplifier, just some fine fettling to some all-important tiny tolerances and tensions ●

A little TLC could save you a lot of money in the long term



CHRIS WARD
Maintenance man

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM LUXMAN/QUAD

In a world where the processes by which we control devices have become ever less tactile, we have reached the point where clicking at a small plastic wiretap seems to be the culmination of humanity's aspirations. So let's take a moment to appreciate the mechanical control. The tactile joy of a well-weighted button, the glide of a high-quality rotary knob and the satisfying 'thunk' of a two-position switch is something that – for me at least – brings a semblance of joy to the business of controlling a device that a smartphone app doesn't even come close to replicating.

The hi-fi industry has a fair few expert practitioners of the art of good controls, but right up near the top of the tree is Luxman. Somebody at Luxman HQ really cares about the business of excellent switchgear and this is probably just as well because their equipment has a considerable requirement for it. Take the LX-380 valve amp you see here. Some of the controls on the front are to be expected – volume and source selection are pretty much a given – but some of them are a little more left field. Not content with tone controls, Luxman also lets you select the frequency that they will be active from. In 37 years, I've not had a requirement for such a thing but now that I know it exists, not having it henceforth will be a real bind.

The amplifier that this splendid array of controls is attached to is fairly unusual in Luxman's lineup in ▶

Sense of occasion

Do you find yourself feeling increasingly detached by modern audio systems? Help is at hand as this might just be the system to redress the balance...



COMPONENTS

LUXMAN LX-380 £6,000

Luxman's only valve integrated is a lavishly equipped and beautifully built homage to the classic 38 Series and offers 18W per channel from its four 6L6 valves.

LUXMAN D-380 £3,800

The D-380 is the matching CD player and is built around a Texas Instruments PCM5102A DAC combined with switchable valve output and adjustable filters.

QUAD Z-3 £2,500

The smaller of the two Z Series floorstanders, the Z-3 combines Quad's bespoke ribbon tweeter with two 175mm bass drivers and a 150mm midrange driver.



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM LUXMAN/QUAD



that it is a valve-based design. Built around a quartet of 6L6 output valves, the LX-380 will deliver 18W into 8ohm – although like a number of Luxman products I've tested over the years, this figure does rather undersell what it seems to be capable of in the real world. You get four line inputs, an excellent MM/MC phono stage and speaker A and B outputs paired with a headphone amp. Luxman has probably heard of minimalism, but clearly doesn't really hold much truck with it.

Match of the day

At first glance though, the matching LX-380 CD player might come across as a simple device. In contrast to a number of standalone CD players, it does without digital inputs, balanced connections and other paraphernalia but there's still some intriguing elements. There's a two-position digital filter, which can be used with and without an ECC82 valve in the output. Like the amp, the switchgear is a bit less extensive – is also rather lovely. No less importantly, it provides a perfect visual match to the amp. Finishing this system is the Z-3 floorstander from IAG stablemate Quad. The Z Series is yet another

reminder that while we will forever associate Quad with electrostatic designs, it is also a dab hand at more conventional speakers. A three-way design, the key ingredient to the Z-3 is a 90 x 12mm true ribbon tweeter. This ensures that the speaker can produce high levels of output and evenly disperse it – in other words, something it has quite the knack for with electrostatics too. At a whisker

The balance struck between realism and tonal richness is millimetre perfect

under a metre tall, the Z-3 is also usefully compact and thanks to a clever flared bass port with special bung, not too demanding to place.

As a system the three units sit together well. But for the difference in lacquers applied to them, the wood on the Quad cabinets and the Luxman surrounds could be from the same tree and there's a pleasing sense of proportion to this system viewed as a full set. The build quality on display is sensational too. There is an attention to detail in all of these products that

Above left: The true ribbon tweeter gives the Z-3 superb HF capabilities

Above: It might look simple, but the D-380 is surprisingly sophisticated

Above right: The LX-380 amp is a tactile dream to interact with

is even beyond the usual standards of this ordinarily fastidious industry. I probably don't need to tell you that the amp is the star of the show. Every interaction with the LX-380 is an experience. Select the phono stage for example and there follows a series of clicks as various relays switch parts of the circuits in and out. Even though it comes with a lovely remote control, this is an amp you find yourself happily walking over to interact with directly.

Surprise surprise

What is crucial to understand about this system, however, is that the quality of the engineering that underpins it is utterly unsentimental. If you stick a CD on expecting to hear a nostalgic portrayal of audio as it might have been, you can forget it. Amadou and Mariam's *La Confusion* powers out from the Quads with a sense of energy and vibrancy that is likely to surprise a few people. This system never has any trouble sounding big, composed and forceful in a way that might seem unlikely taking into account that 18W output.

This means that the opening *Bofou Salou* is delivered with real snap and drive to it. The irresistible funkiness that the duo bring to all their music is



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
LUXMAN/QUAD

woven into the performance and there is never a trace of sluggishness. If you start to pick apart what the different components of the system are doing, it becomes clear that the D-380, even with the tube output in place is a very nimble performer. It handles any time signature with a naturalness that means almost regardless of what you play on it, it manages to sound fundamentally right. There's also very little sense of any of the frequency range being given greater emphasis than anything else so you get an extremely unforced and natural take on material.



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quad-hifi.co.uk

Run – a tremendous recording in its own right – there is never the slightest sense that the presentation is anything other than entirely realistic, but at the same time Crow has rarely sounded more vivid than she does here.

The role that Quad plays in this is not to be underestimated. The Z-3

There's a pleasing sense of proportion to this system when viewed as a full set

manages to deliver everything that these considerably more expensive electronics are sending to it without breaking sweat and that ribbon tweeter is the perfect foil for the tonal vividness that the LX-380 creates. Listening to the Manic Street Preachers' *If You Tolerate This Your Children Will Be Next* with the volume nestled at a level somewhere between 'hearty' and 'anti-social', the Z-3 simply sings. It produces a big and effortlessly spacious soundstage that allows all the detail and nuance that the Luxman duo digs up to be placed effortlessly into that space. It is utterly captivating in a way that can elude

even very talented rivals. No less importantly, if you want to stop listening to earnest but somewhat depressing tropes about the Spanish Civil War and instead enjoy the raw, berserk joy of something like *Youth And Young Manhood* by Kings Of Leon, this system has your back. Once again, it hammers along with metronomic precision, while this usually thin and angry CD gains a bit of mass and body to it. Vocals are vibrant and it's actually possible to discern some of the lyrics – something that's not a given with early Kings Of Leon material.

Stage craft

This system then, is an experience in all senses of the word. It is immaculately constructed, achingly pretty and usefully compact. It's also impressively flexible too. Luxman couldn't make a bad phono stage if it tried and the one fitted to the LX-380 is stunning, meaning it has vinyl fans covered too. Above all these things, it sounds sensational. It's the sort of performance that keeps you going to the small hours, idly wondering what to try next. This is a sensational system – come for the controls and stay for the performance. **ES**

Born to run

The LX-380 is barely less 'down the line' in how it goes about making music too, but listen a little more and the valve character starts to make itself felt. The way it reproduces Billy Gibbons' guitar at the start of ZZ Top's *I Need You Tonight* is absolutely outstanding. There is a texture, presence and sheer realism to it that makes it hard not to sympathetically – and entirely ineptly in my case – try and play along with it. The balance this amp strikes between realism and tonal richness is millimetre perfect. Listening to Sheryl Crow's *Run, Baby,*

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Testing times

David Vivian explains the art of comparative listening tests and discusses the reviewing processes and pitfalls that make it far from a walk in the park

I've never fallen off or, indeed, wobbled precariously on top of a log. But, according to some of my friends, the only thing that's clearly easier than submitting to gravity while attempting to balance on a slim column of wood is reviewing hi-fi equipment. They have a point. Essentially, it's no different to what we all love to do, which is to sit in a comfy chair and listen carefully to our favourite music – the only difference being the requirement for a bit of writing at the end of it all.

It isn't our intention to lock out system owners who are simply into getting the most enjoyment from their music and not so fussed about the minutiae of its reproduction. For that safeguard to apply, however, what we would like to think of as the graceful white swan of critical elucidation gliding serenely across the water's surface disguises the furious paddling against awkward currents, eddies and potentially entangling weeds beneath it. In short, contrary to appearances, reviewing hi-fi isn't a walk in the park, as unchallenging as sweating in a sauna or as easy as falling off a log. If you take it as seriously as we do, nailing the whole caboodle is fiendishly tricky. Why else do you think a young hi-fi hack named Ian Rankin gave it all up to wrestle with the dastardly conceits, crazy convolutions and shuddering plot twists of crime novel writing, becoming rich and famous in the process?

Consistency and minimising any variables is the goal for reviewing

Naturally, there are housekeeping rules we all adhere to. They're set out at the start of every *Group Test* and are largely a matter of common sense: running-in, warming-up, support levelling, speaker positioning and so on. Beyond that, we're left largely to our own devices and that inevitably involves certain rituals to elicit a component's or system's best game and then, in the listening, to make differentiations as clear as possible and put the squeeze on ambiguity. Does that mean personal tastes and preferences are in play? It's a subjective undertaking, so of course. But so long as you know what these are and where we're coming from I think this is helpful and, in my view, more preferable to the committee approach.

The extraordinary thing is, you don't have to change components, fiddle with cables or do a thing for your system to sound very noticeably different from one session to the next. Time of day, the weather, community mains usage, local noise/vibration, room humidity, personal level of hydration, your mood and health – all can affect the

quality of sound you hear, and it's rather disconcerting. For reviewing purposes, consistency and minimising variables is the goal. So, if possible, I listen in the middle of the afternoon (after midnight is best but not always practical) with water or tea for company, not alcohol.

As for the variables, measures to separate the kit from its surroundings – so you're hearing more of the hardware's potential and fewer unpredictable interactions – are essential and centre around isolation and resonance management accessories, in my case sourced from Townshend Audio and Nordost. A clean mains feed with separate passive grounding is equally important to keep signals unsullied and the noise floor low.

Removing the room

Some readers have written in saying they haven't got Townshend Seismic Podiums to put their potential speaker purchases on and so don't know how they would sound just spiked to the floor. Truth is, spiked to my floor, they'd sound very different to being spiked to any other floor in any other room. The room is a major determinant of sound character and quality. De-coupling the speaker from the floor means I hear more of the speaker and less of my room and, from a reviewing standpoint, that works well.

I'll leave you with something a little more contentious. I call it residual sonic image and it occurs when conducting *Group Tests*, especially at the latter stages. Listening, say, to different loudspeakers in quick-fire succession using the same four tracks blurs the areas of difference between them and, unless there are gross contrasts (which is rare these days), makes them sound more similar as the brain begins to superimpose what it's heard before on what it's hearing now. The only way around it is to take what I like to call a 'sorbet break' between sessions and make sure you make notes early on. Happy listening ●



De-coupling the speaker from the floor means DV hears more of the speaker and less of his room



DAVID VIVIAN
Testing testing...

All amped up

As the active loudspeaker comes of age, it's time to discover what a master of the art is capable of

There are times when the full benefit of a particular product cannot be totally realised until other changes and developments in seemingly unrelated areas have come to pass. In the case of active loudspeakers, the technical advantages have been known for some time in professional studio applications, but in terms of what that actually means for home audio fans constructing a system, any benefits have to be measured against the practicalities and upgrade path of a more traditional setup. In truth, you have to be completely on board with the active loudspeaker concept to go to the effort of constructing an audio system around it.

The blurring of where source ends and amplifier begins has recently started to make the active speaker look like a much more enticing concept. With a large swathe of source equipment now sporting a volume control, the ability to

One of the very best implementations of active speakers that I have spent time with

construct a compact but capable system using active loudspeakers has become a much more practical proposition. If you happen to be a bit of an expert in the field, this is very good news and, make no mistake, ATC is a specialist in active speaker design, and its SCM40A is the flagship of its Entry Series.

In the CDA2 Mk2 CD player/USB DAC/preamplifier (HFC 436), it has a product that's able to harness its active loudspeakers in a thoroughly modern way. At its heart, it is a Class A preamp sporting a pair of line inputs that pass through a conventional analogue potentiometer to a choice of balanced and unbalanced outputs. Where things really start to get interesting, however, is the other ►



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM ATC



COMPONENTS

ATC CDA2 MK2 £2,950

This updated multi-functional player combines a high-specification analogue preamp with a DAC, offering analogue and digital inputs and a CD mechanism.

ATC SCM40A £6,800

This design takes the three-way sealed cabinet SCM40 and adds a hefty 242W Class AB tri-amped module to each cabinet for fully active operation.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM ATC



inputs available. Thanks to the inclusion of an AKM DAC, there's also a coaxial, optical and USB-B connection, the latter being able to handle everything up to and including DSD256. Then, because ATC is pragmatic, there's a CD mechanism built in for good measure. This means that combining the CDA2 Mk2 with a pair of active speakers like the SCM40A ensures you have a system that allows you to enjoy the benefits of active speakers and keep the box count down.

Have it large

As the name suggests, this is the active version of the SCM40 (HFC 189) floorstander, the largest member of the Entry Series and, while it is identical from the front, around the back instead of there being a trio of speaker terminals, there's an amp plate supporting a single XLR connection. The amp delivers a hefty 242W into the three drivers, one of which is an example of the distinctive and enormously capable dome midrange offerings that ATC is synonymous with. The combination of the CDA2 Mk2 and SCM40A is rather stylish in a pragmatically business-like way. The SCM40A has a unique aesthetic. It's

finished to a very high standard and it doesn't take up any more room than most rivals, but there is a sense of purpose to it that is plain from the moment you heft it out of the box. This is a feeling that grows the more you spend time with it to the point where even though almost every pair will lead the pampered life of home audio equipment, if you suddenly need it to take the feed off a mixing

This is a collection of equipment that will play anything with a palpable sense of joy

desk for an impromptu gig, it can do so without breaking sweat. It's the same reason that people persist in buying Land Rovers – you're unlikely to climb every mountain and ford every stream, but it's nice to know you can.

The CDA2 Mk2 by contrast is rather more stylish, although it still exudes a no-nonsense air. It fits into the context of the current crop of capable all-in-one systems with the caveat that the amplification is living elsewhere. It would be foolish to describe it as out-of-the-box thinking

Above left: ATC's dome midrange offers fabulous coherence

Above: The CDA2 Mk2 is a clever combination of source and preamp

Above right: The SCM40A's 242W of amplification really allows it to sing

given it is in fact a box, but it is the perfect answer to how to get the most out of a pair of active speakers in a compact and aesthetically pleasing way.

Down to business

Of course, you don't buy products from ATC simply because they look nice, and the moment that you ask this system to get down to business, it reminds you of this in no uncertain terms. With a Melco N1A 4TB NAS drive (HFC 397) connected to the USB input of the CDA2 Mk2, what is most immediately arresting is what a difference going active makes to the SCM40. The passive version of the speaker is supremely capable, but mated with ATC's own amplification it feels like the whole presentation has been turbocharged. This is a startlingly immediate system. The 44.1 rip of Emiliana Torrini's *Gun* has a presence and visceral 'she's right there in the room' quality to it. Her staccato intakes of breath are vivid and absolutely real, while the gradual increase in scale and volume to the track is handled with absolute imperiousness.

And the bass... the low end on offer here is exquisite. The technical arguments for why active speakers



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM ATC

can generate better bass than an equivalent passive design are worthy and entirely accurate, but are no substitute for listening to what this system is really capable of. The sledgehammer low-end of Scratch Massive's *Waiting For A Sign* is simply awesome. If you want bass that you feel as much as hear, there's very little else available anywhere near this price that can out slam this setup. What sets it apart further is that there's nothing I've ever heard anywhere near this price that combines this gut-wrenching impact with the agility this system possesses. As a combo, it is utterly addictive.



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space and richness, but it's the detail that really makes the difference. At the crescendo, Frahm can be heard singing along. On some systems, it's barely distinguishable. Here, it's as clear as a bell.

No less important is that beyond the technical capability – and this system offers it in spades – is a collection of equipment that will play anything and play it with a palpable sense of

The CDA2 Mk2 and SCM40A are stylish in a pragmatically business-like way

joy. Roots Manuva's *Witness (1 Hope)* played at the sort of volume where you can start to see air move is arguably not a hi-fi pursuit. It is, however, some of the most fun you can have with your clothes on. When you're done being a hooligan, you can wind the volume back several notches, select the utterly wonderful *Spirit Of Eden* by Talk Talk and revel in a presentation that is as spacious and natural as you could hope for.

This ability to shift gear and change seemingly every aspect of its behaviour

to suit what is being played at the time is something that goes beyond the active aspect of this system and simply constitutes part of its DNA. At times, I have fallen into the trap of looking at ATC's products and the sheer engineering heft that goes into their construction and assumed that they couldn't possibly be capable of any sense of delicacy. I am happy to report that this duo elegantly proves me wrong. There isn't anything I can find in the cavernous storage of my Melco NAS drive that causes it to break its stride.

Special brew

This, then, is a rather special system even judged by the hallowed standards of *Beautiful Systems*. It is comfortably one of the very best implementations of active speakers that I have had the pleasure of spending any time with. It does the things we have come to expect from equipment today, offering a sensible footprint, flexible inputs and elegant aesthetics. It then combines all of this with a performance that is utterly and unequivocally joyous. The active loudspeaker is no longer simply the optimal choice on paper, it's a real-world champion too. **ES**

The right stuff

The role that the CDA2 Mk2 plays in all this is subtle, but effective. It gets all of the basics right with a wonderfully linear volume control and a total absence of unwanted noise, but beyond that the quality of the digital-to-analogue section is entirely noteworthy. It takes a little time to appreciate quite how good it is because it is so natural and unobtrusive, but it allows this system to demonstrate truly lovely tonality at times. Nils Frahm's *Hammers* is handled with a wonderful sense of

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Hi-fi made simple

Breaking with the traditional mix-and-match approach to hi-fi system building, **Verity Burns** considers the virtues of fuss-free active loudspeaker setups

System matching is arguably one of the most enjoyable aspects of hi-fi, and also one of the trickiest. It's one of the first things you learn about when building your first setup, and something that's always at the back of your mind when it comes to expanding and improving it later down the line. The reason it's so contentious is that there's no exact science to it – no right or wrong. But that's also what makes it fun, mixing and matching components to get a sound that's been tailor made by you.

Despite that, one of the growing areas of hi-fi is premium active setups – speakers with all the system matching done for you, built into a compact one- or two-box system. Of course, active speakers are nothing new. They have long been a more convenient alternative to traditional setups because of their lack of wires and boxes, and preferred as studio monitors due to their ability to make the signal as pure as possible. While tinkering to create a sound yourself is part of the fun, leaving the system matching to the engineers that create the drivers, crossover, cabinet and circuitry has a lot of benefits too.

Yet there has been a hint of hesitation in the industry when it comes to active systems – a feeling that they aren't as authentic as separates amid claims that they're always 'too bright' or 'too forward' compared with a passive setup.

KEF's LS50 W is as precise and focused as it is fun and dynamic

The industry certainly seems to be trying hard to change that opinion, while also attracting new audiences with a more accessible approach. That's only been helped along by the relatively universal shift towards streaming – another trick that the many active speakers have up their sleeves compared with their passive counterparts.

Of course, it's important to distinguish the difference between a proper active system and the often-cheaper powered kind. Both have their place, but when it comes to getting the best sound, it's the active type that's going to give you the purest experience. At its simplest, an active system features a power amp for each driver and more precise line-level crossovers, whereas a traditional system often uses just one amp for all drivers fed to a standard passive crossover. It's the latter you'll find used in the majority of regular Bluetooth, desktop and multi-room speakers, plus powered stereo speakers, such as DALI's superb Zensor 5 AX floorstander costing £800 (HFC 410).

Go to any forum and find a post from anyone asking advice on an active system and you'll find people trying to talk them out of it.



However, it's the former where things start to get interesting in performance terms, and I've recently been spending some time with possibly the best sound-for-pound active speaker system I've heard – KEF's LS50 Wireless (p54) – and I have to say, if you've had any hesitation in turning to an active system, an audition of this smart, flexible system comes highly recommended.

Time to get active

Not only does it come with a good selection of inputs for external sources, including optical, RCA and USB Type-B, but it also supports aptX Bluetooth 4.0 and is network enabled for streaming from connected drives. Best of all, it sounds as good as – and in many cases better than – any comparable separate system you could build for the same £2,000 asking price.

Put simply, you're getting all of the brilliance of KEF's superb LS50 standmount, which is now transformed into an active setup, all built into an equally attractive design that measures only a few millimetres wider and deeper.

It produces hugely enjoyable sound, as precise and focused as it is fun and dynamic. It excels with all genres of music and all sources, with a spacious soundstage and a stunning display of musicality, and music streamed from services like Tidal sound fantastic.

Its built-in DSP also gives you control over exactly how it performs – a level of tailoring a passive system just can't offer – allowing you to adjust the sound depending on placement, as well as to your taste. Best of all, it welcomes all levels of listener, from newbie to enthusiast.

While separate systems remain the way to go if you'll want to keep improving your system over time, active systems like the LS50 Wireless prove that good hi-fi doesn't have to be complicated, nor come in multiple boxes – it really can be as simple as this ●

KEF's LS50 Wireless proves active speakers have a place in modern hi-fi



VERITY BURNS
Active convert

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
NAD/DYNAUDIO

Leading the way

What happens when you combine NAD's flagship electronics with some burly Danes? Something very special indeed, that's what...



ne of the most interesting developments in hi-fi over the last few years has been the slow but inexorable

move away from the idea that minimalism is a prerequisite of high performance. The notion of a device doing two or – shock horror – even more functions and being superb at all of them is finally taking root with a number of manufacturers. Even allowing for this development, though, the system you see here takes that idea and runs with it.

Of course, NAD has some positive form in this particular area. Its Modular Design Concept has been around for some time now and allows you to tailor the facilities that a given product offers to suit your needs. It has sufficient faith in the concept that it extends to its flagship Masters

The functionality on offer here makes many rivals look underdeveloped

range and the rated 2x 150W M32 integrated amp has become pretty much the physical embodiment of the concept. As well as two line inputs supported by a MM phono stage, the back panel is arranged with various slots to allow for different modules to be fitted. As standard, you get a digital board with optical, coaxial and AES digital inputs to partner the analogue ones, or you can add HDMI inputs and outputs or the company's own BluOS UPnP module.

If you want streaming to be a part of your music consumption, you would do well to consider the M50.2. This uses the same BluOS interface, but in ►

COMPONENTS

NAD M50.2 £3,799

The M50.2 combines network functionality, streaming service access and digital inputs with a RAID mirrored internal drive and CD ripper for a one-stop solution.

NAD M32 £3,499

Built around NAD's Digital Direct architecture, this integrated combines a unique software control amplifier stage with on-board digital-to-analogue decoding.

DYNAUDIO CONTOUR 30 FROM £5,750

The middle of three Contour models, the 30 is a 2.5-way floorstander that's built around a pair of 180mm mid/bass drivers and a 28mm soft-dome tweeter.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM NAD/DYNAUDIO



the spirit of multi-tasking, adds a selection of other features that make it a little different from a conventional streamer. The most significant of these is that it is also a server, thanks to an internal 2TB drive and can add and tag its own content using the on-board CD mechanism. Should you not happen to own the file in question, you can access it via one of the many streaming services that BluOS supports. Where the M50.2 doesn't double up is with the decoding. As there's a DAC board in the M32, you simply connect it via a digital cable to that and away you go.

Built to last

Compared with this armada of functionality, Dynaudio's Contour 30 has to be content simply as a speaker, but some of the same ethos can be seen in the lengths that Dynaudio has gone to in its construction. Everything from the Esotar² tweeter through to the recently upgraded feet – allowing the speaker to be levelled while in situ from above the spikes, something you don't want to take for granted with a speaker this size – is bespoke. Dynaudio isn't a 'me too' sort of company, its solutions are frequently different to those seen anywhere else

and have come about for very good reasons. Where both companies have pulled a bit of a blinder, though, is that they have managed to encase this technical wizardry and engineering prowess in an aesthetic that won't have minimalism advocates running for the hills. Thanks to the use of touchscreens, the NAD duo is free of swathes of buttons and the casework is beautifully finished, benefitting

NAD's Modular Design Concept lets you tailor features to suit your needs

from lovely attention to detail. The black of the front plate does a neat job of breaking the chassis up into smaller sections while the spiked feet, with their matching magnetic cups, are gloriously over engineered.

The Dynaudio is also immaculately built. Any imperfection in the (£6,325) gloss finish on a cabinet of that size is going to stick out like an iceberg in the Mediterranean, but the Contour is perfect. Once again, the use of the brushed steel front panel section helps break up the mass of the

Above left: Dynaudio's bespoke drivers work superbly with the NAD

Above: Both companies have a fantastic sense of design

Above right: All the connectivity you'll ever need with the option to add even more

cabinets making this pretty hefty speaker feel a little smaller and more discrete than it actually is. There is also a sense when you unbox and install the Contour that the company's professional heritage is never far from the surface. Sure, it's beautifully made and extremely pretty, but you also get the feeling that if required to do a 10-year stint as a pro monitor, it'd be more than able to get the job done.

Complete control

Combining these products achieves one critical thing pretty much from the moment that you start listening. All of the technical cleverness that goes into them aids and abets their musicality rather than being the story in itself. The M32 is a very radical amplifier – its Direct Digital design works on the idea of keeping the signal in the digital domain for as long as possible. There is also no preamp in the accepted sense of the term, the volume is instead adjusted via software control (although NAD has not been so foolish as to forgo fitting the M32 with a beautifully weighted volume knob). When you play the stunning *My Queen Is Harriet Tubman* by Sons Of Kemet, you won't care one iota for



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM NAD/DYNAUDIO

any of that. You are instead drawn to the fact that the control it exerts over the Dynaudios is absolute.

This means that the potent drumming and staccato brass is delivered with the force and fury of a front row seat. There isn't a picosound of overhang at any stage and this lends this system an immediacy that does a fine job of convincing your brain that you and the artist are sharing the same space and there is nothing so ordinary as electronics in the way. The Dynaudio builds on this lightness of touch by having the ability to deliver the scale required to make instruments sound correct. The piano reproduction in The Cinematic Orchestra's *To Build A Home* is simply beautiful. The weight of the struck notes, their richness of tone and the manner in which they decay is truly lovely.

Are friends electric?

Of course, impressive as this is, if you do limit yourself to smooth and well-recorded material, you will miss out on this system's truly outstanding party piece. If you're a listener to electronica in all of its many forms – and I unquestionably am – this setup can do things that I have heard



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considerably more expensive equipment fail to achieve. The combination of the NAD's incredibly transparent digital decoding and vast power delivery into a speaker as effortlessly capable as the Dynaudio is a recipe for extended sessions at the sort of volumes that makes the air in

There is a sense with the Contour that its heritage is never far from the surface

the room a visible presence. The dreamlike *When You're Out* by Kauf loses none of its ephemeral quality even when the Contour is reproducing its baseline with a force that you can feel in the sternum.

The word that crops up time and time again in my notes is 'clean'. It reflects the near impossibility of tripping this system up with any style of music at any volume that is remotely achievable in most domestic settings. This is tied to functionality that makes many rivals look parochial and rather underdeveloped. The BluOS interface has been carefully honed into something that is stable,

wonderfully intuitive and impressively flexible. The M50.2 is all too easy to overlook in this trio of components because it is unassuming to the point of stealthiness, but it forms the heart of this system's impressive user friendliness – there are very few other one-stop network audio solutions that get within a mile of it.

Better than all the rest

The longer I listen to this system, the more I am reminded of the strategic concept of full spectrum dominance. It reflects the idea of cumulative superiority from being better than your opponents in every single area you contest with them. While it might not be a familiar principal for most hi-fi companies, what NAD and Dynaudio have done here is clearly along the same lines.

What this system does is contend every area you might rationally or emotionally judge it by and make a bulletproof case in all of them. It is one of the most remarkable blends of technical ability, real-world user friendliness and outright musical joy that I have experienced in quite a while. This is the new way of doing things and, be under no illusions, it is astonishingly good. **ES**

Fighting censorship

As Spotify unveiled a policy against “hateful conduct” **Nigel Williamson** found himself wondering precisely what determines what we should and shouldn’t be listening to

There’s a splendid organisation I’ve supported for many years called Freemuse, which campaigns for freedom of artistic expression and on behalf of banned musicians around the world. Its activities usually centre around censorship by the more unpleasant and undemocratic regimes and is pursuing active cases in China, Russia and Iran.

The row that erupted over Spotify’s controversial policy to remove “hate content” from the music on its streaming platform may mean that Freemuse needs to turn its attention to matters a littler closer to home.

Back in May, Spotify announced it would not playlist any music that “expressly and principally promotes, advocates, or incites hatred or violence against a group or individual based on characteristics, including race, religion, gender identity, sex, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, veteran status, or disability”. All entirely laudable in principle, but fraught with difficulties in practice – especially as at the same time Spotify also declared its new policy would apply to artists deemed guilty of “hateful conduct”, even if their music was in itself inoffensive.

As a result of the new policy, two artists were blacklisted – R Kelly and the American rapper XXXTentacion. The former because of various allegations of sexual abuse

Surely I should have the right to listen to any music if I choose to do so?

made over the years, and the latter over the allegation that he physically assaulted a pregnant woman. As you would imagine, the decision resulted in a social media firestorm. Those who supported the move demanded to know why a string of other artists accused of sexual or physical abuse hadn’t been removed. Others railed against what they saw as a quite unacceptable form of censorship and pointed out that the allegations against R Kelly and XXXTentacion were unproven and neither had actually been found guilty of anything in a court of law.

The uproar resulted in Spotify CEO Daniel Ek being forced to backtrack. “We rolled this out wrong,” he said. “The goal was to make sure that we didn’t have hate speech on the service. It was never about punishing one individual”. The policies are still “active”, we are told, but will “evolve” in response to feedback. And that, as far as I know, remains the position at the time of writing.

I’m sure that Ek is sincere in wanting to eradicate music with a hateful message – although artists have a creative right to offend, and a violent lyric is not necessarily an incitement to hatred. When Jimi Hendrix shot his woman



down in *Hey Joe*, he was not advocating or encouraging violence against women. He was telling a story and playing a character within it. No doubt gangsta rappers would claim the same.

The existing laws covering hate speech and incitement should be enough to determine what is acceptable in a pop lyric without radio stations or streaming platforms imposing their own additional layers of censorship.

There is more than a little inconsistency in Spotify’s stance, too. R Kelly and XXXTentacion have been targeted, despite not being convicted of any crimes: yet the music of Gary Glitter and Jonathan King, both of whom were given prison sentences for sex crimes, is still available on Spotify.

Personally, I cannot hear Glitter’s music without thinking of his victims, so I choose not to listen. But it’s a matter of personal choice and surely I should have the right to listen to it if I want to do so?

Where does it end?

And if we ban the music of everyone who has ever done something hateful, where does it end? Does the way Led Zeppelin once treated groupies (some of whom were under age) mean that there shall be no more *Whole Lotta Love* or *Stairway To Heaven*?

What about Eric Clapton’s infamous support for Enoch Powell all those years ago, for which he has never apologised? Shall we ban *Layla* and *Tears In Heaven*? What about Morrissey, who has said some borderline racist things in his time? Shall we stop listening to all those glorious songs he wrote with Johnny Marr for The Smiths?

Anyone concerned about this slippery slope and the wider issues surrounding the censorship of music around the globe, should checkout the work Freemuse is doing here: <https://freemuse.org> ●

Separating what an artist says or does from their music can be a thorny issue



NIGEL WILLIAMSON
Speaker’s corner

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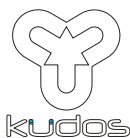
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